

SANITARIUM

Bringing you the best in horror, one case at a time.

**ALL NEW
STORIES**

Patrick Winters

Leslie Bohem

Lucretia Vastea

Joe Prosit

& Much More...



DARK VERSE:

Luke Tarzian

Comateta M. Clifton

Reg Rhodes



#025

We spend a moment with:

Richard Thomas

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ISSUE TWENTY FIVE

Dear Reader,

We have reached another milestone, 2 years of Sanitarium! So what does that mean, well in a nutshell we have showcased over 270 works of horror fiction and dark verse, interviewed 25 writers, publishers and seen where the horror happens with around 20 writers.

All in all it has been a great two years – and we're only just getting started. We have a roadmap for the next 12 issues, starting with a visit to Scardiff in October (look for our write up in Issue 27). We also have some great interviews coming up with masters of horror and up and coming talents.

This issue sees 9 new stories, 3 dark verse, news, reviews and interviews with Richard Thomas and Sydney Leigh.

We hope you enjoy the issue and if you do, please leave a review or rate the app if you are reading it on an iPad. Every little bit of feedback helps.

Welcome to the Sanitarium

Barry Skelhorn
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Contributors:

Geoffrey Marsh
Lucretia Vastea
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Leslie Bohem
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NEWS

MONSTER HUNTER: WASTELAND

The wars are over. The monsters have won.

There is nowhere monsters don't stalk anymore; not the burnt out cities or desolate countryside. The monster's endless search for the last of humanity grows intense as the number of people dwindle and the legions of hungry creatures swell.

The battle between life and death is constant. No place is safe.

But, the people who have survived are the fastest, the strongest and the most resourceful. Among them are the last monster hunters: individuals that have visited the depths of nightmare and survived. Individuals that have become the things that haunt those nightmares...

They will never submit, no matter how large or small the gain. Their purpose is clear... Hunt the monsters. Reclaim the WASTELAND.

Deadline: March 1, 2015

Length: 2,000-8,000 words

Payment: \$25 + ebook contributor copy

[Submission Guidelines](#)

THE LOST WORLDS

To be published later this year, "The Lost Worlds" will be an anthology in the Steampunk Horror Genre devoted to the post-apocalyptic theme. Send us worlds rebuilt by steam powered engines and mechanical marvels. Send us characters we can root for as they fight the good

fight. Send us worlds our readers can romanticize about, characters that jump off the page. We want to set the Steampunk world ablaze with "The Lost Worlds" so we only want your best. - See more at: <http://darkmarkets.com/#sthash.jCBX-y6YW.dpuf>

Deadline: November 1, 2014

Length: 5,000 words

Payment: .05 cents/word

[Submission Guidelines](#)

DARK FUSE: ANTHOLOGY SERIES

DarkFuse is an anthology series (published up to 4 times per year) collecting the finest short stories in the modern era of dark fiction. It is published by DarkFuse, the premier dark fiction publisher, and continues the objective of the company's successful novel and novella book line, which is to produce high quality fiction from both established and undiscovered authors.

Each new volume will feature 6 original short stories, all with a dark edge.

Deadline: Ongoing

Word Count: 2K-5K

Payment: \$50 on acceptance plus 5% of revenue per author from sales of the eBook anthology. Each contributor will receive a copy of the limited hardcover edition.

Fiction: Horror, thriller, suspense, crime, sci-fi, bizarre—anything with a dark slant. Original, never-before-published stories. No reprints.

[Submission Guidelines](#)

AUTUMN CTHULHU

Well, the words Autumn Cthulhu sum it up somewhat. But, though pastiche can be done well, I don't want it here. In other words, less "Mythos" and more "Lovecraftian". I'm talking about the themes of Lovecraft: cosmic horror, deep time, man's irrelevant place in the universe, horrific truths about reality, etc...

So the story should be Lovecraftian, set in the fall. You could include Halloween, and in fact I very much hope some of you do, but it's not a necessity. There's a mood and a magic and a mystery to autumn; think colorful falling leaves, crisp days, rainy afternoons and evenings. A cold drizzle.

Quiet horror.

Deadline: October 31, 2014
Word Count: 3,000-6,000 words
Payment: \$150
[Submission Guidelines](#)

APOTHEOSIS

Stories of human survival and defiance in a world subjugated by the return of the Elder Gods.

Humanity struggled to grow and evolve as a species for thousands of years forever caught in the shadow of a dread threat known only to a devoted few. When the stars are right, the Old Ones will return to claim utter dominion of the world.

Lovecraft Mythos stories often climax at the moment of the fateful return of the Elder Gods and the audience is left to ponder what might happen next.

This anthology features stories about humanity under the reign of the Elder Gods and ancient terrors.

Deadline: Nov 1, – Dec 31, 2014
Length: 2,000-7,000 words
Payment: 3 cents per word + contributor copy (ebook & print)
[Submission Guidelines](#)

SNAFU II: SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

SNAFU brought the pain. SNAFU II will bring even more. Survival horror says it all. Resident Evil... Silent Hill... with soldiers. Straining to make that one clip of rounds last. Making sure not to waste a single bullet. Lost in the shadows, low on ammo and/or wounded, fighting to survive, the last remnants of the mission team trying to make sense of where they had gone wrong, and how to make it out alive with next-to-no resources. We still want combat, don't get me wrong, but we also want fear... we want suspense and tension... we want originality in the monster/antagonist, and how they are finally overcome. To allow for this building of atmosphere and tension, we have upped the word limit. And then, we want something jaw-droppingly amazing.

Deadline: Oct 1 – Dec 31, 2014
Word Count: 1,000-10,000 words
Payment: AUD4c/word + contributor copy
[Submission Guidelines](#)



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

Chasm

Geoffrey Marsh

Physician: Dr. Roundtree
8245-AVD12

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Chasm

By Geoffrey Marsh

TREVOR AWOKE.

He cracked open his eyes. Overhead, the dawning sun painted the clouds bright orange against a deep violet background. Morning. He must have fallen asleep in the backyard last night – not the first time.

He rolled over. Instead of his pool, his garden, his patio, he faced a dilapidated mansion – vine covered, run down. The Funkhouser place. Old man Funkhouser passed away six years ago, and as his heirs feuded in court the house sat vacant, slowly falling apart from neglect.

Trevor jerked upwards to a crouch. How had he gotten here? The last thing he remembered was waking up next to Anna and glancing at the clock, which read 2:43. Then he woke up . . . here.

He shivered in dew-wet pyjama bottoms. This wasn't the first time he had awoken here. This happened once last week, and another time a couple weeks ago.

From inside the house came the faint sound of laughter. Or was it just a distant siren? No, there it was, a child's giggle with a far-away echoing quality, like someone tickling a toddler at the bottom of a well. He had heard that laughter before. That night up on the mountain.

No! No he hadn't! He had been delusional from the shock of finding Gordie's body, smashed and broken in the boulder field below, savaged by scavengers in the darkness. Their three day mountain bike junket had ended prematurely, horribly. The official explanation was that Gord had wandered off in the night and fallen from a ledge. Anything else was a hallucination.

Shock. That's all it was.

The giggle came again.

That feeling rose in his stomach. If he listened to these delusions, he would end up back in the hospital. He couldn't stand another course there – the concerned looks from Anna, the fear in the eyes of little Sammie, the long conversations with people in white coats who were "here to help," the medications, and, above all else, the sound of doors being locked between him and freedom.

That giggle came again.

PTSD, they called it. It can even cause hallucinations, they said. These aren't real. If you ignore them and remind yourself they aren't real, they will lose their power.

"You aren't real," he muttered through clattering teeth as he shivered from cold and from fear. A tear streaked down his cheek.

But what if it was real? What, exactly, had happened up there?

"I don't think this is the trail," Trevor said as he coasted to a stop next to Gordie. The trail had narrowed as it reached a small summit. Beyond, the ridge ended unexpectedly and dropped into the valley below.

It wasn't the first time they had gone down the wrong path on a ride. When you're whipping through the forest it's easy to miss the occasional turn.

These three or four day mountain bike junkets were an annual tradition, Trevor and Gordon usually took one in the spring and one in the fall. They selected different routes, usually in the mountains but occasionally other noteworthy places. This was the first time they had taken this particular ride through western Maryland and southern Pennsylvania.

Leaving their bikes, they scrambled up to the summit for a clear view all around. While Trevor reached for his cell phone and GPS, Gordie, an orienteering geek, dug a map and compass out of his pack.

"We're supposed to be over there," Gordie said after a moment, pointing to a parallel ridge. "Somehow we got off on a spur. We have about a mile backtrack, no biggie" he said.

Trevor looked up at the mid-afternoon sky. The forest below was quiet except for the singing of birds and the rustle of the breeze. They had passed a spring a couple hundred yards back. This seemed like a perfect place to spend the night, then backtrack the next day. Gordie concurred.

Trevor lay in bed trying to focus on his book rather than his tumultuous thoughts. It hadn't been an easy day. After waking up in front of the Funkhouser place, he spent the morning in tough contract negotiations at work. Once everyone had signed on the dotted line his colleagues decided to spend the afternoon in a bar celebrating. Trevor had come home instead – leaving too much time sitting around the house alone thinking.

"I thought that kid was never going to get to sleep," Anna muttered, entering the bedroom. She sat next to him, cross-legged, facing him. Trevor knew that position,

it was her "we need to talk" pose.

"Yes?" He said.

"You were out in front of the Funkhouser's this morning."

Trevor cringed inside, but said nothing.

"Trevor . . ." Anna gave that pained expression, the one that had appeared in those days right after the trip in the mountains.

He looked down. "I'm not going back to that hospital. I know what I saw up there. I don't know what it was, I don't know why it happened, I don't understand. But" he trailed off.

"You've never told me what happened. The doctors told me a little, but I've been afraid to ask. If you won't seek help, at least tell me what you saw."

Trevor took a deep breath and told her.

Crickets.

Then the nylon rustling of a sleeping bag, the whining buzz of a tent flap zipper. Gordie getting up to take a piss. Trevor rolled over in his own tent as he heard Gordie crunch a few feet into the woods and relieve himself.

A moment later, Trevor came awake with a start. Or was it a moment? A sound had woken him, but he wasn't sure what. He unzipped the tent flap and peered out into the darkness.

Gordie's tent was empty.

Then he heard it. Gordie's voice, screaming. "It's too deep. Oh dear God, it's too deep!"

Trevor spun around. The voice came from further down the ridge, back towards the main trail.

"Gordie!" He hollered. "Where are you? It's Trevor. I'm coming."

He snatched his headlamp from his tent and fumbled strapping it on as he careened down the mountain trail in the darkness. The headlamp's cone of light bobbed up and down, side-to-side, as he ran. Branches whipping his face and arms.

"Oh God, Oh God, it's too deep," Gordie's scream coursed across the mountainside and echoed back from the distant ridges.

Trevor rounded a bend in the trail and came to a hard stop.

Below yawned a chasm in the living rock of the mountain, darkness filled the void beyond the halo of the headlamp. It hadn't been there just a few hours before when they came this way.

Gordie's tortured voice came from deep within the chasm. Wordless this time, just a scream cut short suddenly.

Trevor dropped to his knees and peered into the gloom of the rift, looking for something, anything. He hadn't felt an earthquake or a landslide – how had this canyon just opened up in the middle of the night? And how had Gordon gotten down there? Nothing made sense.

"Gordie!" Trevor called. "Gordie, can you hear me? Where are you."

Silence.

Dew soaked his t-shirt as he lay on the lip of the chasm. His headlamp illuminated ten or fifteen feet of abyss, but beyond was Stygian blackness. A few feet below, a pathway on a narrow ledge wound downwards into the darkness. This must have been how Gordie got down there – either under his own steam, or someone else's.

He dropped gingerly onto the tiny trail, hugging the chasm wall for fear he may go plummeting off into the abyss of darkness at the slightest misstep. A cool breeze wafted up from the depths, smelling of mold and decay, as if something had died and rotted long ago.

At first, the walls of the chasm were jagged and fragmented, exposing the heaving, distorted bedrock beneath the mountain. As he descended, slowly the chaotic jumble of boulders were replaced with stones that had been fitted by some ancient stonemason. The trail smoothed out, widened as the chasm walls narrowed and closed over his head, providing a ceiling to the wide passageway. Trevor reached out and touched the damp wall, and a chill shot through his body, an awareness. These stones were ancient. Long before mankind wandered across the Bering Strait, this passage was already moldering in darkness, carved by unknown hands.

Something appeared at the very edge of his illumination, laying on the road. Gordie's t-shirt.

"Gordo!" Called Trevor.

The name echoed through the stone labyrinth, returning back to him, mocking. But nothing else stirred.

He sped up to a trot. An arch loomed out of the blackness. An arch like he had ever seen, a structure of twisted spires and triangles interwoven with cord-like protrusions. It was . . . alien.

Trevor paused. For the first time real fear tickled his spine and turned his already damp skin cold and clammy. What was this place?

Trevor awoke but didn't open his eyes. He and Anna had talked long into the night. He wasn't sure she completely believed him, but she seemed to at least accept that something had happened up on the ridges that defied all logic and reason. If she could accept that, then he was okay with skepticism about the details.

And now he had awoken to the feel of grass on his bare back, his pyjama bottoms

soaked to the skin with dew. He hoped he was in his backyard, but knew when he opened his eyes he would be in front of the Funkhouser place.

His suspicions were confirmed by the sound of a childish giggle.

Then the sound of Anna's scream.

"Trevor!"

He whipped his eyes open. Climbing the porch steps of the Funkhouser place in her footy PJs, clutching her favorite stuffed tiger, was Sammie. The front door yawned, blackness beckoned.

"No!" Trevor yelled and leapt forward. It seemed as though the distance between himself and the front porch grew as he ran. Ahead of him, Sammie reached the top of the steps, and without acknowledging the screams from her parents behind, she stepped through the threshold.

The door slammed shut behind her.

In the still, dank air something stirred. A sound like a wet rag dragging across the floor, then a low, almost cat-like moan.

"Gord!" He called, but only echoes answered.

Trevor trotted through the arch, down a passageway into a massive hall whose ceiling soared beyond the glow from his headlamp. The chamber was lined with immense statues, their tops mere shadows. He could faintly see a dog head on one, next to a snake-like beast. At the front of the column stood the likeness of something indescribable, a monstrous mass of slithering tentacles. At the other end facing this hideous abomination, was a statue of a woman, pendulous breasts hanging down on a distended, pregnant stomach.

Something moved and gave a tiny giggle.

Hiding in the shadow of the woman's statue was a small, pasty-white child.

Trevor slammed into the door of the Funkhouser place, tugged at the knob, screamed Sammie's name. Anna, still in the baggie T-shirt she wore to bed, leapt up onto the porch, tugged at the door and a window to no avail.

They raced into the backyard, an overgrown tangle of vines, weeds, and poison ivy. The back door and windows were firmly boarded up, but set into the foundation was a rotting, splintering wooden bulkhead secured with a padlock. Trevor gave the handles an exploratory tug, then hopped up and put all his weight on the decaying wood. One or two jumps and the bulkhead crashed inwards, revealing concrete steps leading downwards to the basement and a door that was just as

rotted as the bulkhead had been.

It only took two kicks of his bare foot to send the door crashing in. The basement of the Funkhouser place lay before them.

The child turned and ran, Trevor hot on his heels. In the next room, the child made a hard right and disappeared down another corridor, but Trevor came up short.

The chamber was about the same size as the statuary hall. In the center, a pool thirty feet in diameter reflected the light from Trevor's headlamp, making eerie sparkles on the walls. The water was foul and black, exuding the stench of decay that Trevor had noticed the moment he entered the chasm.

Three stone pillars around the pool arched up to a platform fifteen feet above the water from which something dripped into the pool below.

Blood. Fresh.

Trevor circled the pool. The arch on the far side had a set of stairs leading to the platform above. At the foot of the stairs, another alien arch and a corridor beyond. He glanced down the corridor but saw nothing lurking. With a sigh of trepidation he crept up the stairs.

At the top, the dais was ten feet wide. A stone table lay in the middle, a blood-stained metal apparatus hung above it, disappearing into the darkness beyond his headlamp.

Gordie lay upon the table. The apparatus above had driven into his chest, forcing itself in below the breastbone, down towards the heart. Arteries trailed out of the body, dribbling blood off the edge of the platform.

He remembered Gordo's screams. "It's too deep."

Trevor vomited, his bile mixing with Gordon's blood and trickling off the dais into the pool.

A soft sound behind him, he spun around. The pale child stood at the bottom of the stairs, blocking his retreat. It giggled.

"We needed your friend to save my mother, but you are not supposed to be here. You make my father very unhappy," it whispered, then giggled again.

In the passage behind the child, something horrid slithered. Something with many grasping arms.

Trevor looked at the pool below, said a prayer, and jumped.

The water knocked the headlamp from his head and sent it spinning lazily through the murk. He surfaced, sputtering for air, gagging on a mixture of water, blood, and vomit. He snatched the lamp and scrambled from the pool.

The child gave a squeal of rage and came around the pool at a run. Behind, a

horror, the stuff of a thousand nightmares, slipped from the dark corridor into the halo of the headlamp.

Trevor felt his gorge rise again, but forced it down with pure willpower, sprinting back the way he came.

He raced through the hallway of the statues and up the ramp leading out. Occasionally he cast his eyes behind and just beyond the edge of the light a tiny white shape lurked, and something larger, darker. Somewhere on the way out, his pursuers fell away. But before they did, he heard the child squeal "we will find you."

Finally he collapsed, spent, on the forest floor. In the east dawn was breaking, the first rays of the sun just touching the summit above him. He rolled over to confirm his pursuers had retreated, but the chasm was gone. The mountainside looked just as it had when they had rolled up the previous afternoon.

Trevor knew he should be terrified, but when your child is threatened, the self disappears and something greater steps up to take its place. He was ready to walk through hell itself to bring Sammie back, and at his shoulder he knew Anna breathed with the same fearless determination.

The basement beyond the door was black. Not expecting any success, felt for a switch, flicked it, and to his surprise a dusty, cobweb-encased bulb cast a sick yellow glow around the basement. A musty puddle lay in a corner to his right, straight ahead stairs leading upstairs, to his left, a pile of yard tools. Trevor selected a heavy shovel and handed a lighter hand sickle to Anna.

He made a quick survey ensuring there was nothing lurking in the basement shadows then climbed the stairs to the main floor. At the top, the door was locked. He threw his weight against it to no avail, then swung the spade, sending one of the panels skittering across the hardwood floor upstairs.

Anna followed him into the hallway. Ahead, the front parlor of the old house and a room he remembered old man Funkhouser used as an office. Behind was the kitchen and a pantry. The house was quiet as night.

"Sammie?" Called Trevor. No answer. "Sammie?"

He took a few steps toward the front of the house. In the dim light from the boarded-up windows he could see the front door. Besides the dust, the office and parlor sat as the old man had them on the day he died.

A screech from behind. Trevor spun. In the door to the kitchen stood an abomination. A woman above the waist, a slithering, multi-armed thing below. Running down the center of the woman's chest was a fresh scar.

This was the . . . thing . . . that had Gordo's heart.

Before his own rage could drive him forward, Anna raised the sickle above her head and attacked.

"Give me my daughter, you whore!" she screamed.

The monster was momentarily stunned by the attack, and that was all Anna needed. She swung the sickle two-handed like a baseball bat, driving the point three inches into the creature's neck. The wound poured black blood as the thing collapsed to the floor, propping itself up with one hand while holding the gash with another, its face a mask of shock.

Trevor hefted the shovel and stove in the thing's head, sprawling the corpse in a puddle of its own fluid.

Anna, soaked to the skin in the thing's blood, cast about. "Sammie!" she called.

From above, a faint moan and a soft rustle. Anna started up the stairs, then came to a quick stop.

At the top of the stairs stood that dark, tentacled horror that Trevor had caught a glimpse of in the chasm on the mountain.

"Where is my daughter?" Anna cried.

An arm snaked out and snatched her her leg, forcing her to drop the sickle and seize the banister to keep from toppling down the stairs.

Trevor charged, shovel held before him like a pike. He fought past a pair of groping tentacles and drove the spade deep into the mass of slithering limbs. Black goo emerged from the wound. The thing dropped Anna and retreated down the hallway, Trevor close behind, spearing it at every opportunity.

"Not so tough now, are you?" he snarled, driving it into the far bedroom where he cornered it behind the bed. Anna pushed past, driving the sharp end of the sickle into the flesh at the very top of the thing. She wrenched the sickle free and drove it in again, and again, before it finally sank down, an inanimate mass of arms soaked in blood on the floor.

A low cry came from the closet. Anna lept over the bed and ripped it open.

Inside was Sammie, huddled in the corner. Anna fell to her knees and embraced her daughter, who sobbed softly.

Trevor looked around. Was it really that easy? These things had barely put up a fight. He and Anna were covered in blood but not a scratch on them.

But where was that little child-thing?

As if an answer, a hollow, far-away giggle from below. Trevor crept down the stairs, shovel held before him.

A giggle came from the front parlor. Trevor peered inside. A single ray of light escaped a boarded-up window, illuminating a swirl of dust motes in a corner where the child-thing stood. It giggled again in its eerie way, and smiled.

"I wouldn't smile," Trevor muttered. "You're next you little fucker." He advanced, preparing to swing the shovel.

The monster shrugged. "You were right, it really isn't that easy." Then, as if it were a light bulb that had been switched off, the child-thing flickered out.

Trevor spun around but there was nothing there. He ran through the house but nowhere from basement to attic was there any sign of the creature.

He climbed back up to the bedroom. His head was swimming, he felt woozy.

The room was dark. Anna still clutched Sammie. She pointed to Trevor. "Look, it's Daddy."

Sammie walked towards him. Her skin was pasty-white.

A chill ran up his spine. Anna still sat on the floor, but her legs didn't look right.

Sammie smiled and gave a hollow, far-away giggle as the faint smell of mold and decay tickled Trevor's nose.

The End.

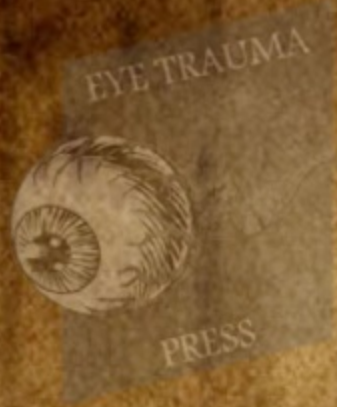
Case #59650

Geoffrey Marsh

Geoffrey Marsh writes mysteries, dark fiction, general fiction, and just about anything else that gets caught in the sieve of his imagination. He has been an active member of several critique groups over the past twenty years, honing his craft and learning from more accomplished, published writers. Though he recently had a story accepted for an upcoming issue of Cemetery Moon, it appears Sanitarium will be the first journal to publish his work. When not writing or hanging out with his rescued mutt, Ellie, he is a mountain biker, cyclist, sea kayaker, and geocacher. Because he needs to eat in order to write, by day he is an IT specialist with the U.S. federal government. He lives in central Maryland.



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

Sick

Lucretia Vastea

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

Sick

by Lucretia Vastea

"I'LL GET SOBER AS SOON AS SEPTEMBER ENDS!" is what he always tells himself on the first day of that month. He hates fall because he hates ambiguities. He gets used to the humidity in the atmosphere by October, but September is the worst part of summer's argument with winter. An argument which, unlike March, isn't won by the summer. He never actually realised how much he hates cold seasons, until the owner of his favorite bar told him and his boys that, by the end of the week, he'll have to close the terrace. And the terrace is the best thing about this bar--and the fact that it's right next to his apartment, of course. He can see his bedroom window from the table he's sitting at: fourth floor, second window from the left.

"Earth callin' Z!", yells Duncan, one of his friends, with his breath smelling like two beers too much. "How about it? You in?"

"In for what?"

"The concert, stupid! Krepp's band is playing at Nick's place on sunday", interferes Roy.

"You guys know I'm broke."

"This is so fucking pissing me off, man!", says Rick. "You're the only one of us who has a job, and yet, you're always broke!"

"I gotta catch up on the rent. I'm two months behind."

"You know what? Fuck it!", says Roy. "I owe you for the arm wrestling from last week. So, the concert is on me! Now, you have to come!"

"Whoa! You challenged Z, of all people, to an arm wrestling match?!", asks Rick with a serious amount of surprise in his voice. "Didn't it ever occur to you that his arm is almost twice as thick as yours?!"

"Hey! I may be a skinny motherfucker, but I'm just as strong as you guys!", says Roy while flexing his arms proudly. "Z was lucky I was too shitfaced to put some muscle in it."

"What muscle, loser?! You can't even hold your own dick when you take a piss!"

Duncan's laughter is shaking the table. Roy, insulted, tries to strike back.

"Oh, you wanna talk about dicks, huh? How about the time when yours got a pimple and you almost shit yourself thinking that you got lues?!"

As Duncan enjoys every single second of Roy's and Rick's debate, Z takes his cellphone out of his pocket to check the time. 12:59. Perfect. He sets it on mute, goes to the menu, selects "camera", chooses the "video" option and taps the "zoom in"-dot three times. His friends' discussion is too intense for them to mind what he is doing. Z brushes his right hand over his close-trimmed hair and places his elbow on the table, as if he is paying attention to the conversation. Under the table, he holds his telephone in his left hand, with the camera towards the sidewalk. Careful enough not to be noticed, he taps the red dot which indicates "record" and starts counting in his head.

Any second now.

Even though he always tries to seem as relaxed as ever, his heart is slamming the inside of his chest and his phone gets more and more difficult to hold, as the sweat of his palm makes it slippery.

Calm down... don't let them notice.

"That reminds me, Duncan! How's your girl?"

"I got plenty. Be more specific."

"Oh, you know: the one you're related to."

"Fuck off, Roy! I'm not related to her! It just so happens that her mom was my dad's girlfriend in college! That's all!"

"Riiight. You guys sure you're not relatives? 'Cause, I swear man, the two of you are just as ugly!"

All friends laugh wholeheartedly, when Duncan interrupts the general amusement by addressing Z.

"Doesn't that chick live in your building?"

Even though he knows whom he's referring to, Z slowly turns his head to the left, to see his new neighbour passing by, with her cellphone against her ear. Feeling watched, the girl takes a glimpse of the boys' table, and her glare meets Z's. Something inside of him winces. And that something is in growth for a while now, getting bigger and bigger by the hour--like a tumour. She instantly breaks the visual contact between them and rushes up her pace.

"Yeah. She lives in my building."

Oh, the irony.

"She's new here, ain't she?"

"Mhm... she moved here in June. Or July, don't remember."

Three months, three weeks, five days.

"What floor?"

"Mine."

She sleeps at exactly twenty feet away from me.

"She's cute."

"Not my type."

Cute? That's it?!

"Yeah, Z, but she'd still make a good lay. Go for her!"

Z raises one eyebrow and looks at his friends with intended skepticism.

"This one? Get real! Just look at her, man! Straight A's, never late for work, daddy's little up-in-coming lawyer with her own bank account, where her allowance has been put aside as college money since she was an infant!"

Z stops recording and puts his phone back in his pocket discretely.

"I don't think she even knows what a dick looks like! And, if she does, that dick is probably attached to a Harvard teacher!"

"Damn these type of bitches, man!", concludes Rick.

"Amen! Let's drink to that!", says Z lifting his beer bottle over the center of the table, where his friend's bottles meet it with a jingling "Cheers!".

"Do you have any idea what her name is?"

"Who's?"

"Your neighbour's. The girl that just walked by."

"Beats me! How should I know?"

Ramona... miss Winston called after her the other day "Ramona".

As soon as he enters his apartment, Z locks the door, takes his shirt off and goes straight to the bathroom. He places his hands under the flow of cold water and splashes his face, head and neck with the refreshing fluid. As soon as his mind goes silent, he turns the tap off, straightens his back and stares at himself in the mirror.

Z is only twenty six years old, but his stare and strong jaw tell the story of a much older man. His almond-shaped eyes are black as tar, and the deep dark circles beneath them make them seem even darker. His skin is incredibly pale. So pale, that the contrast between his paleness and the tattoos on his arms, make him seem almost translucent. His left earlobe is pierced and he shaves his face and head almost daily--not because he likes to stand out as the tough guy of the neighbourhood, but because his facial hair makes him look like his dad too much.

Z left home when he was only eighteen. He told his parents that he's off to another city, where he plans on working for "a year or so", so that he can raise enough money to go to college. He raised the money, started going to college, but the plan collapsed after only one semester. Even though he never was a bad student, he always hated school, and the freedom he discovered after leaving his alcoholic mother and abusive father behind, taught him that life is too short to be invested in things one hates.

His full name is Harold Alexander Zanin, but he always introduces himself as

"Z". "Z" is not short for "Zanin", even though all his friends assume it is. When he was in middle school, Z was the 'fat kid', and his classmates always bullied him because of that. They named him "Zero", after the number which shape he resembled and because he was a nobody. He made nothing of it, until one evening, during supper, his dad called him a "zero-shaped scum" because he asked for a second plate of maccarone and cheese. After that, Z never tasted a piece of candy ever again. He began eating less and started jogging daily to complete exhaustion. Within less than a year, "Zero" lost so much weight, that, not only did he began feeling his ribs under his fingers, but he started to fight back when bullied in school. Reducing his nickname from "Zero" to "Z" was the doing of those around him--not his own. And, even though it's tied to some of the ugliest memories he has, he considers his nickname to be his biggest accomplishment in life so far.

Z goes to his bedroom and turns the computer on. As the machine comes to life, he lets himself fall on the couch while humming a song he's obsessed with lately.

He is waiting for it. The violent tremble of a mad man's weak flesh. It's been a month since he's no longer scared by it, but on the contrary: he embraces it. Z lifts both hands to meet his glare, and as they start to shake, he clenches his fists tightly, as if he'd want every single vein in his arms to pop. He's grinning. He's sweating and grinning.

Z takes his phone out of his pocket. His hands are still shaking, but his impatience is stronger than his anxiety. He goes straight to the gallery of his phone and selects the latest video made.

There she is!

Jesus, that blood-red hair... how it dances when she walks... how those breasts jump with each step she takes... how tight those jeans wrap themselves around her and what a sweet sound that zipper would make if she's take them off in front of me... What colour panties does she have on? Red? No, no, white! Or black. What colour panties does she own, I wonder... I bet they're all cute... like her... with stripes and polka dots! What do her panties smell like after a hard day of work? I'd... I'd... oh, fuck!

Z already set his priorities, and there is something that needs to be done before he attends to his carnal needs. He connects his phone to the computer, copies the video on the desktop and plays it.

His neighbour appears in the frame. Z presses the "Print Screen" button, opens a blank page in "Paint" and pastes the screenshot on it. He saves the document with the title "932", knowing that he'll open it in photoshop later on.

His neighbour is looking into the lens. "Print Screen". The procedure is saved entitled "933".

She's speeding up the pace... "Print Screen", "934". "Print Screen", "935". "Print Screen", "936". Z replays the video and makes four more Screenshots just to reach

the number "940". An upsetting thought crosses through his mind, but he's not strong enough to do anything about it.

Sixty more and I'll reach one thousand. Who would have thought...

He sometimes feels like it's more of a habit than a necessity. Now that summer is over, and his usual filming-spot at the terrace is gone, it's very unlikely that he'll ever reach that "one thousand" he's concerned about--not that he had ever made a goal out of this. After giving every image the needed contrast and color hue, he prints a copy of each and every one of them, gets up, takes the freshly printed sheets of paper in one hand, the set of keys hidden behind his desktop in the other and heads towards the bathroom... only, the bathroom is not his destination this time.

Opposite the bathroom door is another door. Behind this door is the second bedroom of the apartment--a bedroom which, according to Z's infinite excuses, he's not allowed to use, because he's paying rent for only one room. As soon as the owner of the place will find another tenant, the second room will be occupied as well, but, until then, it needs to remain locked and tidy. Of course, nobody ever heard of a more stupid justification for a locked door in one's apartment, but, apparently, Z's friends got used to the idea that "the second room" is not part of his place. Hell knows what he could have told them to make them believe him!

Z feels the keys in his hand as if he's massaging them, picks one that he's gotten especially fond of lately, places it in the restricted room's lock and twists it twice slowly, enjoying every single second of the procedure--especially the conclusive *click* at the end. Before letting the entire weight of his arm drop on the knob, he takes a moment to let the warmth of the arousal and the shivering of delicious guilt take over him.

Z opens the door to squeaky hinges. The room is drownd in complete darkness. He painted the window with black paint on the inside of it the very day he started isolating this room from the rest of the world. Yes, he does live on the fourth floor, but one never knows when someone just might get the bright idea to paint the entire surface of the building.

Z enters the room and closes the door behind him. A stinky smell of mold penetrates his airways. He starts feeling the wall on his left, in search of the light switch, and as soon as he finds it, he takes a deep, satisfied breath and turns the light on.

The room is seven feet tall and its wooden floor has been gnawed by the most ruthless insect of them all: time. The light bulb, the only source which allows one the privilege of sight, is hanging by a long cable. Apparently, Z's visit made the light bulb a little nervous, as its cable moves it gently from left to right and back again. Z takes a couple of steps forward, and stops as soon as he feels the warmth of the light bulb brush the top of his head.

All four walls of the room are covered in pictures of her. His new neighbour. Ramona. The pictures are of all sizes: from really small, like pocket portraits, to really large ones--live-sized, even! There's this one particular picture which he enlarged just because he managed to immortalize her front. He did the best he could in making the image as distinct as possible, printed it out in pieces and glued them together on the wall. Thinking that it would be a good idea, he bought a porn magazine because of the live-sized poster of a naked chick that came with it, cut the chick's face out and attached her body to Ramona's live-sized head on his wall. At first, he thought he did a pretty good job, even though Ramona's head was a bit too big for the rest of the body, and her slight blush didn't quite fit the naked model's oily skin. After a couple of days, Z realized that 'naked' Ramona was annihilating the entire charm and positive energy of the altar, and even though he couldn't feel more disgusted with himself than he already was, he could just feel like an idiot for denigrating his muse in such a foul manner. The one thing that remained still visible of the 'naked' Ramona, is her head floating on a sea of hundreds of other pictures.

Z looks around in search for a few free square inches, to put the freshly printed pictures on. As he multiplied a lot from the previous "1 to 931" batch, there isn't a lot of free space on the room's walls. As every single spot has been covered up by Ramona's image, Z stands in the middle of the room with just one picture remaining in his hand. He goes back to the door, leans his back against it and lets himself slide down to the floor, where he gathers his legs beneath him. This is his favorite spot--he can see everything from here. He can suck on her appearance without freaking anybody out. He just wants to look at her. Absorb the sight of her. Take her in. Feel her vibrations through his sight.

It's not like I collect her fingernails... or the hair that remains on her brush... or Q-tips she used. It's just pictures. Blank, impersonal, plain and unidentifiable pictures.

Z goes back, time and time again, to that one moment he wanted to approach her. They intersected with each other on the corridor, and as he wanted to introduce himself and welcome her to the neighbourhood, she rushed up her pace and swung by him. He developed a little complex because of that, and shortly after, she was everything his mind was concerned with.

Eyes: nutella. Hair: mermaid. Cheeks: strawberry cheesecake. Lips: petals. Neck: bottle of white wine. Breasts: two halves of a canary melon. Her... Who the hell is she?!

There's a loud knocking at the door. The front door, that is.

"C'mon, Z! I don't got all day!"

Z shakes his thoughts off, gets out of the altar and is careful enough to lock it and hide the key back behind the desktop, before opening the apartment door.

"Hold your horses! The door's too old to resist!"

Z is just about to open the door as he realizes that Ramona's remaining picture is still in his hands. Alarmed, he crumples it and throws it in the paper basket next to his sofa, to open the door to an irritated Duncan.

"Three whole minutes, man?! What took ya? I could have had a heart attack!"

"I was on the toilet! Want details?!"

Duncan sighs and enters Z's apartment.

"What are you doing here, man? I thought you were off with Rick and Roy to get those concert tickets... Everything alright?"

Duncan smiles at him while communicating the reason of his visit through his glare. Z understands what's happening and gets angry instantly.

"Come on, man! Again?!?"

"It's for the last time, bro! I swear!"

"Can you even comprehend how much time you'd get?"

"I've never been caught! Not even as a newbie! What makes you think I'd get caught this time?"

"Everything! I know you! And you won't be able to hold your mouth shut! If you get caught, you'll drag me along with you!"

"Seriously, man? This is the thanks I get for being there 24/7 for the last 4 fuckin' years of your fuckin' life?! I'd rather double my time behind bars than share a soap in the showers with you!"

Z doesn't feel like laughing. He waits patiently for Duncan to forward further information.

"You know me, man. I won't get caught. I've done it too many times. We have done it too many times, and this time, the risks are mi-ni-mal! I swear! It's karma, man!"

"I'm sorry, but, whatever you're up to, count me out of it!"

Duncan gets angry.

"What the fuck, Z? Two years ago, breaking entries was our life! What?! Now that you found a job, easy money is not money enough for you anymore?!"

"Cut it out, or I'll smack the shit out of you. I said: count me out!"

"Fine! Just hear me out!"

"Dunc, dun wanna..."

"You know Greg, right? I already told you about him! He got this granny, right?!"

"Duncan..."

"...she's going to her daughter's, in Belgium, next week! She's an old, greedy bitch, and keeps all her savings in a mattress! And you'll never guess what mattress I'm talking about!"

"I. Don't. Care!"

"Remember when we used to take almost a grand 'per night?!"

"Duncan, if you won't shut it right this instant...!"

"Fine! Whatever! Be fair and shit, I don't give a fuck! Just... teach me how you unlock those damn things."

Duncan points to the apartment door. Z looks at him as a concerned parent would.

"If you get caught... you won't tell on me?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die! I'd never do that!"

Z looks at his friend, knowing that he won't leave until he gives him what he wants.

"Who is it?"

"70-year old! She owns a restaurant and is widowed since last year."

"How fat is the mattress?"

"As fat as it gets!"

"Is it a sure thing?"

"The plane ticket to Belgium has been bought 6 weeks ago!"

"Fine then: you'll need two... no, four steel needles. Five inches each. A lighter, a syringe with vaseline and two wooden ice cream sticks. And get a bottle of chloroform as well. You never know... "

It's 8:25 p.m. It's Friday, and the last day of Z's unpaid vacation. He is watching Fight Club for the seventh time in his life, while waiting patiently--he does this every time Ramona works the afternoon shift at the non-stop diner down the street. He managed to understand her working schedule by throwing glimpses out the window day in and day out, to see at what time she leaves and enters the building.

She's home by 8:36 on Fridays.

He can't sleep right when she's not sleeping under the same roof as him. Her night shifts are the worst, for he doesn't sleep at all. He's used to it, tho--to staying awake, that is.

As Tyler Durden and the narrator recruit the members for Project Mayhem, Z gets up and goes to the window. He stares to the right, the direction from which a red-headed girl should approach the block any second now... He can only guess what she's like, but he's certain that it's unlike her to linger in one place when her job there is done. Besides, she's very punctual. She leaves and enters the building at very precise times of day.

Z gets back to his computer to look at the time. 8:55.

Oh, fuck it!

He grabs his jacket, thrusts his boots on and storms out of the apartment.

It's a lovely evening. It's warm and pleasant, but it would make no difference to Z if an earthquake would emerge on the spot. He takes a good look around, hoping that he'll see Ramona approaching. As the darkest of thoughts cross through his mind, his feet start heading towards the non-stop diner at the end of the street. And just as he starts to pick up the pace, he hears a pair of giggling voices somewhere far behind him. Usually, he wouldn't pay attention to such things, but, as alarmed as he is, every change of scenery is a thrill. Z instinctively looks behind him and freezes in place as soon as he does.

Ramona is approaching her block from the other end of the street, with a daffodil in her hand, a smile on her face and a handsome young man alongside her. The boy she's with tells her something funny, apparently, because she lets out a short laugh once every two seconds. Z rushes up behind the building he's next to, and circumambulates the blocks that separate him from Ramona and her new friend. He gets as close as he can, careful enough not to be seen or heard by the couple, and even though he seems to master the situation, his head and body are victims of an emotional typhoon.

Ramona stops in front of her building and searches her pockets for the access card.

"Well, thank you for the flower and the walk. It was really nice."

"My pleasure, lovely! We can do it again tomorrow, if you'd like. I can pick you up after work and we can go to..."

"Sorry, but I can't. I work the night shift tomorrow. It's Saturday..."

"That's ok. I can pick you up on Sunday morning and we can go have breakfast together!"

From where he's standing, Z can't see Ramona's face very well, as the red cascade of her hair is blocking his sight. Still, he sees that she tilt her head slightly to look at her hands playing with the set of keys.

"You know, Ramona... I really like you. I want to see you again."

"You will see me again. You're at the diner all the time."

"Yeah, but I wanna see you outside of the diner! I want to take you on a proper date sometime!"

Ramona doesn't answer him. She just keeps on avoiding his stare while playing with her keys.

"Sooo..."

"So, be patient. This is too sudden for me."

Ramona looks at the boy and smiles. Z's ankles can barely support his weight anymore. She opens the front door, still smiling at the young man who walked her home.

"Well... I guess this is goodnight."

"Yeah. This is a good night".

One can tell by the boy's posture, that he was about to lean in for a kiss on the cheek, but Ramona entered the building and closed the door behind her as soon as their exchange of "goodnight" formalities was over. Still, the boy turns away from the door with a bright smile across his face, and walks pass Z whistling.

Z wants nothing more than to drag him behind the block and smack his face against every rock on the alley. But he's too ravaged to move. Or think. Or breathe. He can only stand there, hidden, listening to his screaming organs. As his ankles are about to give in, he leans against the wall for balance, letting the surface of the bricks comfort him. Several minutes after, a thought pops into his head.

I need a shower.

Next thing he knows, he's completely dressed in the shower, pressing the front of his body against the cold surface of the tiles, as the cold stream of water turns boiling hot. His back is burning from the violent heat, and his front is aching from the stinging cold. Ambiguities... He hates ambiguities.

Z turns the tap off, gets out of the shower and walks to his computer to take the keys to his altar, his dripping clothes making a mess all over the place. He steps inside the bedroom and closes the door behind him, not bothering to turn on the light. He presses his back against the door, lets himself slide down on the floor slowly, and does the one thing he never thought he'd do--ever!: starts to cry over a girl! Of course, he has had some crushes in the past and he has had a lot of female friends he got down and dirty with, but this... he has never felt anything like this before. He had to see her with another man to realize how obsessed he actually is! Until now, this room, his altar, was for recreation purposes only. When someone idolizes a singer or an actor, he or she puts posters of that artist all over his or her bedroom walls... right? Why would it be so wrong to worship, not an artist, but a mere person... a beautiful and intangible person? He could have sworn that he's on the right side of the border between admiration and obsession, but, boy, was he wrong! It's not okay to fill a room with pictures of someone, whoever that someone may be, and still think of yourself as normal.

He's sick. He's a very sick bastard. And now he knows it.

Z gets a hold of himself, breathes in deeply and stands up while taking his soaking wet shirt off. He turns on the light and, for the first time ever, he doesn't shiver at all. He's no longer the slave of his desires, but their master. He looks around, not admiring what he sees, but making sure that everything is where it's supposed to be. As the last two hours of his life flash back to him, he turns off the light and leaves the room, not bothering to lock it up again.

Exhausted, he lets himself fall on the couch and as the welcoming arms of sleep are about to embrace him, Duncan knocks at the door so loudly, that Z's jerk of

surprise comes with a mild outcry.

"C'mon, man! Don't tell me you're asleep already! It's Friday night and it's not even midnight yet!"

Rage storms over Z like a dozen shots of adrenaline. He jumps out of bed, goes to the door, opens it and grabs Duncan by the collar. After he pulls him inside, he shuts the door and smashes his back against it.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Duncan freezes. He knows that Z's temper could boil up an entire ocean, but he never thought that he could go there so fast, and because of a silly visit.

"Okay, man... calm down."

"No! Speak now, or I'll throw your ass out! Through the window!"

"I, err..."

"You. What?!"

"I, uhm, I just came by to show you the s... The stuff I got. The stuff you told me to get. And I thought you could teach me... the thing you do. With the locks... tonight."

"You picked a really bad time to bother me with your shit!"

"Yeah, I can see that. I can come back tomorrow, no biggie!"

"Go fuck yourself, man!"

Z lets go of Duncan's collar and turns on the light. Duncan is very surprised to see the redness of his eyes. Has he been crying?!

"Dude... what..."

"Shut it, or I'll cut your dick off and shove it up your ass!"

Duncan goes silent as a grave yard.

"Show me the stuff."

"Man, really, I can come back tomorrow! There's really no rush..."

"Show me already!"

Startled, Duncan shows his hands in the pockets of his pants, and puts everything he finds in them on Z's bed: four steel needles, a lighter, a metal box of vaseline, a syringe in a sterilized wrap, two little wooden sticks and a 300 ml bottle of chloroform. Duncan waits for Z to either comment on the stuff he got, or kick him out, but Z is just standing there, gazing at the tools as if he'd been hypnotized.

Z's insides gather around his soul, suffocating it. His lips part, and his fingers start to tremble gently, as a well-known warmth creeps up on him.

Ambiguities... he hates them! Then, why not do something about it?

It's all or nothing. Now or never.

"Give them to me."

Duncan is startled.

"What?!"

"I need them. I'll pay for them, just give them to me."

His voice is calm, but his arms tremble like crazy.

"Z, are you okay?"

"Yes, Duncan."

"Oh... kay? What do you need them for?"

"Something that needs to be done."

Z looks at his friend coldly, letting him know that It would be a wise decision to cut the questioning short.

"Z... Alex, if you need help with anything..."

"It's not help I need, man. It's this stuff right here."

Z's stare gets a little warmer.

"Trust me. I won't do anything foolish. And, if something goes wrong, I won't turn on you."

"I know. But that's not what I'm worried about."

Z smiles at him sincerely.

"How much did they cost?"

"Forget it, man. There's no way I'm taking money from you. Just... be careful, alright?"

"Always am."

Duncan tries very hard not to reveal the messed-up state he's in, as he walks to the door, feeling the need to get as far from Z as possible.

"I'll come back on Sunday with some new stuff. You'll teach me then, alright?"

"Sure thing."

Of course, Duncan doesn't know that he'll never see Z again.

Z gets up at 15:47. Yes, it's Saturday, but even though he's never actually been a morning person, he likes waking up early. He couldn't sleep, even though he never felt more tired. He tossed and turned the entire night, thinking about what needs to be done. As soon as the sun came up, Z called his boss to tell him that he's going to close his bank account and will need his paycheck in cash. Surprisingly, he was able to fall asleep soon after that, but the sleep didn't help. He woke up freezing.

The hot shower didn't help much, either. He tried to talk himself out of it, but all he could think about was how her skin will feel to his touch and how her smell will be all over him. He doesn't want to hurt her, but neither does he want to keep on hurting. He'll be gentle with her. How could he not? He worships her! And she'll like everything he'll do to her! Every caress, every kiss, every push and every pull. If she won't, well... there are many ways to silence a woman.

His mind's made up. Whatever happens, happens. There is no turning back.

Z gets out of the shower, dries himself up quickly and dresses in black from head to toe. He throws the whole content of his wardrobe on the floor, grabs a big backpack and stuffs it with a pair of snickers, some shirts, a pair of jeans, socks and underwear. Careful not to forget anything, he checks for things that might come in handy, finding an old pocket knife behind the cupboard, and a stainless steel flask that still has some bourbon in it. He won't be needing any documents or technological accessories, as to "travel light" receives a different meaning in his case.

After packing everything up, he goes to the kitchen to grab a knife and plunge it into the sofa, where he stored some money. As he finishes slaughtering the piece of furniture, Z looks around his apartment floor to realize that, he can compress every single thing he owns in one small, general picture: a pile of garbage. Nothing which is his is of any worth to him. And yet...

Z walks to his second room, and stops with his hand on the handle. No. He doesn't want to see the altar, even though it would be for the last time. All he wants is one picture... one picture, no matter how blurry or out of focus. Every print on the walls of that room represents a unique memory. 940 memories of Ramona, 940 precious possessions of his. Or... was it 939? Z steps away from the door and goes back to his room, to the basket next to his extendable couch. He takes out a piece of crumpled paper, unfolds it and discovers a picture of his red haired goddess talking on the phone.

Z smiles wholeheartedly. He wanted to take a picture of her with him... Now, why on earth would he want that, when the memory he's about to tear away from her, is thousand times more valuable? Faith is finally about to intersect with his desires, and he's drooling over a picture of his Juliet, like a thirteen year-old punk.

The stuff Duncan brought over the other night, are on the cupboard. Z grabs the lighter, ignites the picture in his hands and watches fascinated as his muse burns to ashes.

Z's arms are on the sides of the brass peephole of his apartment door. He has been looking through it for ten minutes straight now, thinking that, after Ramona leaves for the night shift, he'll wait a couple of hours before breaking into her place. Now that it's almost 9 p.m., he's more eager than ever to perpetrate his intentions.

There's the sound of a door opening and closing shut on the other side of his door. The jingle of a set of keys followed by a metallic pawl, are like music to Z's ears. Not long after, a "clack clack" sound made by a pair of low heels is passing by his door, conducting a beautiful face, framed by blood-red hair, to the night

shift at a shitty diner. Z holds his breath as he waits for the sound of her steps to turn completely silent. He knows that he should, at least, wait until she has left the building, but the window is too far away, and he has wasted enough time waiting for her to go to work. Z grabs his backpack and opens the door as silently as he can.

Coast is clear. Perfect. Z gets out of his apartment, closes the door behind him, goes to Ramona's door and starts "operating" on its lock with a steel needle and a wooden stick. His ass is toast if someone catches him in the act, but he already told himself that he's willing to live with the consequences, whatever they may be. Still, his intuition has never let him down, and he feels too sure of himself and his plan, to let negative thoughts take over him. After less than a minute of pure adrenaline, Z hears a victorious "click" which announces the opening of Sesame. A new personal record! He grabs the knob and twists it gently to the left, pushing the door aside with just one finger. Out of caution, he takes another look around the hallway. He's alone. Alone and unstoppable.

The first thing he does as soon as he's in, is to lock the door again. He wouldn't want Ramona to suspect anything when she comes home in the morning. As soon as he finishes the job, he exhales in relief, lets his backpack drop to the floor and turns around to inspect the place a little. It's lovely! It's colorful, welcoming and it smells like jasmine. It smells as Ramona's hair will smell, when he'll sink his face in it, 8 hours from now. Her stuff is all over the place, even though it looks pretty tidy. It's like a calculated mess, and the thought of that makes him giggle, because it reminds him of himself somehow. Z grabs a random shirt off a chair, holds it to his face and breathes in deeply, realizing that... he did it. Yes! He did it! He's in her apartment. Waiting for her to come home! He's so overwhelmed, he could almost cry.

Z gets his hands on everything he sees: small statues, necklaces, bracelets, candles, small bottles of liquor, books, notebooks, pencils, a leather wallet, everything! He feels the need to get acquainted to every single thing of hers. The walls are painted purple, blue and orange, and apparently, some twisted images of people are hidden in the mixture of colours. His muse is an artist--how adorable!

Since the architecture of her apartment is identical to his, Z feels the need to expand his delight by introducing himself to the second room as well. She has a sofa in the first room, but there has to be a queen-sized bed in the second one, and he just can't wait to dive into those sheets! On his way to the room with the entrance perpendicular to the bathroom, Z examines every single inch around him with a beaming smile, but...

as soon as his hand pushes the handle down to reveal the better part of Sesame, his smile slowly retreats itself from his face, and his eyebrows undulate in a frown. The door is locked.

Oh, shit, not again!

Ramona rummages through her shoulder bag in search for her wallet. Her mind is off to another place lately, making her forget stuff all the time. Yesterday, for example, she almost forgot to lock the safe-deposit box at work before heading home! Lucky for her, no customer noticed it, and she remembered just in time to go back to the diner and close the damn thing properly. Unfortunately, the annoying kid that has been bugging her lately, kind of cornered her with that daffodil. She'll have to break his heart sooner or later. She never liked the cute, careful, charming type--the type of guys all girls dream about. To her, they're repulsive, and she's not going to make an exception for a dizzy fellow, just because he has a crush on her.

Knowing that she has no other choice, Ramona turns around and heads back home. She has a wallet to recoup.

Z shakes the door up a little, thinking that the lock bolt is just being moody. Realizing that the door is truly locked, alarming curiosity takes place of the enthusiasm that was convulsing him a few seconds ago. He rushes over to his backpack, where he hid the rest of Duncan's tools, and gets back to the door that won't reveal all of Ramona's secrets to him.

Why would she keep a room in her house locked up? Doesn't she live alone? What could she be hiding in here?!

After a five-minute-marathon of "Fuck!'s" and "Screw you!'s", Z finally gets the lock open. Feeling a hint of the excitement that was taking over him earlier, he opens the door to... squeaky hinges.

He can't say what, but something is terribly bothersome about this room...

Its inner is black as tar, and even though it's dark outside and the window is towards a courtyard, there should be some sort of light penetrating through it. Z tries to pull himself together as he takes one step forward and feels up the wall on his left in search for the light switch.

He finds it.

And once he turns it on, his thoughts suspend themselves somewhere far above him.

Z forgets everything. He forgets what the number 940 means, why he yelled at Duncan the other day, why he had to ruin his couch earlier and, above all, why he broke into a stranger's house this time of night. He steps forward, not knowing

what else to do.

This... This can't be! This is inhuman!

All four walls of the room are covered up with pictures of himself. Him. Z. Harold Alexander Zanin.

Z's excitement turns to pure horror as he analyses every picture at a time, noticing that a lot of them have been taken as he enjoyed a beer with his mates at the terrace next to his block. Rick's, Roy's and Duncan's faces have been scribbled on with a black marker.

She... she wasn't on the phone at all. She... she was...

Repulsion, disgust and fear braid themselves around his spine, sending thousands of needles throughout his entire body. His head is as heavy as a tombstone, and his legs, as weak as gum.

This is sick!

Nothing in the world could awaken him from the trance of this terror...

Nothing, except the sound of a shoulder bag dropping to the floor.

Z turns around instantly, to see Ramona standing in front of him, as petrified as he is.

An eternity goes by as they stare at each other lividly. She is the first to make a move.

As she straightens her back and narrows her eyes, she tests Z's reactions by taking a step forward. Z takes a step back.

Sensing his fear, the edges of a smile sting her cheeks--edges which sting deeper and deeper as she gently grabs the handle and closes the door.

The End.

Case #16030

Lucretia Vastea

There are few realistic biographical aspects one can gather regarding Lucreția Vășteană (Spell her name! I dare you!). Other than her being a 22-year-old Romanian who's studying teatrology in Cluj-Napoca and rarely calling her parents to assure them that she's still alive, she is, pretty much, built of fiction. Dark fiction, of course. (Still, don't insult her reality - you might awaken Cerberus' younger sister). She has been writing all of her life, but began just recently to translate her work in English. "Sick" represents her debut as a published author--in this lifetime, of course.



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

Cleaning Up Old Memories

Hal Kempka

Physician: Dr. Edgar
9828-SJE41



Cleaning Up Old Memories

By Hal Kempka

WHEN CARL'S CAR NO LONGER FIT BETWEEN the piled up boxes, old furniture, and camping gear, he decided to clean out the garage. Donna, his wife breathed a sigh of relief. Her years of nagging him to get rid of all the accumulated junk finally paid off.

That weekend, he went to work dragging old furniture to the curb, and filling trash bags with old clothes, knick-knacks, books, and magazines.

While sorting through the stacks of dusty cardboard boxes, it pained him to discard items that still carried some meaning or attachment to the past. In order to appease Donna however, he forced himself to drag the bags to the curb next to the old furniture for the following day's trash pickup.

One box crammed with memorabilia wistfully immersed him in his youth. Carl grabbed his old high school yearbook and slouched into a worn, overstuffed easy chair. He thumbed through it and drifted back in time.

Photos of the football team vying for the city championship gave him the same adrenaline rush he felt that night during the kickoff. A photo of him making a vicious tackle on a ball carrier triggered a migraine-like pain similar to the concussion he received when their helmets collided.

He relived page after page, enraptured in the past. His chest swelled with pride upon reaching the homecoming page. When he glanced at the photo of him being crowned homecoming king, his smile faded. Someone had scribbled over the face of his queen.

As he glanced at his classmates' photos, he laughed remembering the antics of the geeks, bookworms, and hoods. Then, he spotted Sheila Borden's class picture. His stomach churned.

They attended grade and high school together, but always hung out with different crowds and seldom spoke to each other. Their only commonality was a one-night stand the fall of their senior year. They lost their virginity to each other at a riverside keg party.

A month later, she told him she was pregnant and that he was the father. Fortunately, no one except the two of them knew about their encounter. Sheila nagged him to marry her, but Carl said no.

Finally, he told her to fuck off. That enraged her to the point she went nuts. She

beat on his car and chased after him like an angry dog when he drove off.

"You better marry me, you son of a bitch!" she screamed. "Or you'll be one sorry bastard some day!"

The following spring however, she dropped out of school and disappeared. No one knew what had happened or where she went. Several years after graduation a rumor circulated that she died while giving birth in a home for unwed mothers.

Carl shivered as a sudden draft filled the room. As he bent over to retrieve the box a sharp, stabbing pain shot up through his anus. It spread across his lower abdomen, and knocked him to the garage floor in excruciating pain.

His crotch suddenly felt warm and wet as if he pissed his pants. Carl grabbed his pants but yanked his hands back. He stared horror-stricken at the thick, sticky blood dripping off his fingers.

He yelled for Donna, but his voice barely rose above a whisper. Carl fought to breathe and writhed about the floor, nearly delirious. The garage light suddenly dimmed and the stench of decay stung his nostrils.

A raspy voice called out, "Hello, Carl. Remember me?"

An emaciated, pasty-skinned woman with stringy, thin hair stepped from the shadows. She stared down at him through vacant, milky eyes. Numerous slashes marred her waxy arm cradling an infant with parchment-thin, sallow skin that suckled her withered gray breast.

"Oh God," he rasped. "Sheila!"

"I believe these are yours."

She thrust a blood-soaked hand of steaming entrails at him.

"But, why?" He pleaded.

"Because I wanted you to feel the same pain I felt when you rejected me, as well as when I had your baby."

His eyes glazed over. "Oh, God! I'm sorry."

She cackled and leaned toward him.

You see? I told you someday you'd be sorry. But you told me to fuck off, remember?"

"But, we were just kids, and didn't know about anything then!"

"You knew enough to knock me up, didn't you? And, you wanted me long enough to have your way with me. Well, guess what?"

Sheila grunted, and pried the foul smelling baby away from her rotting nipple. She dropped the putrid smelling infant into Carl's arms.

"Here, daddy, give your baby a hug. Now, we can all be together forever as one happy family."

A few minutes later, Donna opened the door. "Carl, who were you talking to?"

When he didn't answer, she stepped into the garage. Donna covered her mouth and nose, gagging from the stench hanging in the air. She peeked around the

stack of boxes, and began screaming hysterically.

Carl lay on the floor disemboweled and surrounded by scattered memorabilia. His entrails draped one arm and the other clutched the decayed corpses of a woman and a baby boy.

The End.

Case #81772

Hal Kempka

Hal Kempka's short stories have appeared in numerous horror magazines including 69 Flavors of Paranoia, Night to Dawn, Black Petals, and Twisted Dreams. His horror flash fiction anthology Blue Plate Special is available on Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and Smashwords. Other anthologies featuring my stories include Post Mortem Press: Shadow Play, Pill Hill Press: Rotting Tales and Blood Bound Books: Seasons in the Abyss. He lives in Southern California.

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Spectral

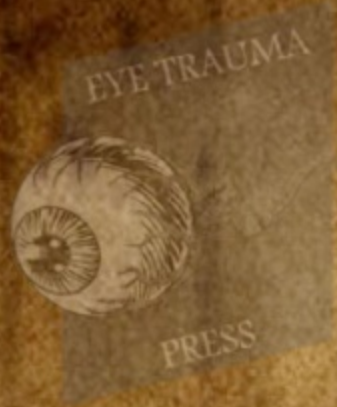
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SANITARIUM



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CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

Repo

Leslie Bohem

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19



REPO

by Leslie Bohem

THE TWO MEN WALKED UP THE STAIRS. Brian and Brad. Brian said, "Possession, that's what it's all about. Possession is nine tenths of the law. The first thing they tell you and the last thing you need to know."

He'd done this job a lot. A seasoned vet. Ten years older than Brad, who was just starting out. He was holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers. He said, "You're gonna feel bad about it at first, and that's only natural. The subjects will cry, beg, run. But they made a deal. They owe a debt. We're just collecting, we're not the bad guys here."

He looked at Brad, wanting to impress this on him.

"It's a business like any other. Don't get yourself wrapped up in it. All these people with their personal problems. Are you nervous? You look nervous."

Brad said, "I'm O.K."

"See, to me, it's about personal failing. A lot of the people we collect from, they're gonna say it's about misrepresentation, they were told something different from the reality of the situation. But I'm sorry, that's not how it is. There are a few things left in this wicked world that count for anything, and one of them has got to be your word."

"A man's word is his bond."

"That's exactly right. It's his bond, and when it isn't, you call us. That's my point, they say we're scavengers, bloodsuckers, when the fact is we're the moral line."

"The social contract."

"Simple as that. All we're out here saying. 'Hey, hold up your end.'"

They'd reached the top of the stairs, and now they walked down a hallway. They stopped outside a door. Brian looked at Brad.

"You sure you're not nervous? You've got the harder part of the gig here. Doing the actual repo."

"I'm good."

"What you want to do, you want to seem to be looking right in their eyes. That intimidates. Window of the soul, all that. But you don't want to really look until you need to. Otherwise, it can throw you off. You see tears, anger, pain. So what you do, you stare right here." He pointed at an imaginary spot in the center of his

forehead. The third eye spot. "I'm looking you in the eye, right?"

"Right."

"But I'm not. I don't see you at all. Until right... now."

He dropped his gaze just a little so that he was looking right into Brad's eyes.

"You see it?"

"All the difference in the world."

Brian nodded. It was time. He looked at Brad again and he said, "Here we go. You should take your first knock. Pop your cherry."

Brad nodded. He knocked on the door.

Reminding Brad one more time, Brian said, "Possession is nine tenths of the law."

They waited. They heard a woman's voice from the other side of the door say, "Yes."

Brian said, "Ms. Watson? Anne Watson? Delivery for you. Flowers."

She waited for a long moment, then she opened the door. She was young. The apartment behind her was sparse, modern, elegant. The apartment of a very successful young woman.

Brian offered her the flowers. A bit clumsily, but still. "Here you go."

The young woman took the flowers. Brian looked at Brad. Brad moved one step forward, blocking the door.

"Do you like them?"

"They're lovely, yes."

Brian said, "I picked them out myself," and that made her look at him."

"They're from me," he said. "From the two of us. Our condolences."

"I don't understand."

By now, they were in the apartment.

"Who are you?"

Brian said, "It doesn't really matter. "

Brad was looking around the room. The 50 inch flat screen. The Mac. The furniture. There was a window open. The street far below.

The young woman, Anne, said, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"We're not going to do that," Brian said. "We're from repo."

"Repo? I don't owe on anything."

"Our employer would beg to differ."

"Your employer?"

"Think back. Your first year at Duke. You were failing all your classes. Your boyfriend, I believe his name was Steve, had just walked out on you. You'd lost that job at the law library. You were bottoming out, desperate to turn it around. That's when you met our employer at bar at the Durham Hilton."

"Jesus," Anne said. The look of stunned recognition was one Brian had seen

before.

"Not who we work for." he said.

"That guy was a joke," Anne said. "Some drunken frat boy in a bar. He was laughing, making all kinds of offers, all kinds of promises."

Brian glanced at Brad who was taking his time, looking at all Anne's nice things.

"What did I tell you?" Brian said. "They always try to claim misrepresentation." He turned to Anne. "I think, if you'll look back over the last ten years, you'll have to admit that you couldn't have gotten all of this without a lot of help."

Anne said, "I was lucky."

"Lucky. Interesting choice of words."

"I've got some cash here. I could pay you. To go away I mean."

"We don't want your money."

She looked to Brad, tears welling up.

"Please. You seem like a reasonable person. Do I look like someone who would ever have made a deal like this?"

"I don't really..." Brad shifted his gaze slightly. Looking at that spot on her forehead, not in her eyes. Just like Brian had said. Brian nodded approvingly. Anne could see she was not going to get anywhere by pleading.

"I'm not going to give it to you," she said. "You must know that. And you can't just take it. I remember that was... part of the agreement."

Neither Brad nor Brian said anything.

Anne's voice was pleading. "Why now?"

"Because it's crueler that way," Brian said. "And cruelty is his stock in trade."

She looked at him, taking that in. She started backing up.

"Just who did you think you were dealing with?" Brian asked her.

"You can't take it. You can't take my soul until I'm dead!"

Anne looked past him. At Brad. She saw Brad's eyes drop that fraction of an inch. Then turn to look right at her.

Brian said, "Are you in?"

Anne's head turned so that she was facing Brian, but it was Brad's voice that came from her mouth.

"I'm in."

Then, Brad, inside of Anne, had her turn, walk out onto her balcony, climb the railing, and throw herself over the landing and down the eight floors to the tile of the entryway below. It was that easy.

When Brian turned, Brad was back, standing next to him. Brian smiled at the newbie. "Like I was saying, possession is nine tenths of the law."

The End.

Case #23296

Leslie Bohem

Les Bohem was part of the great Los Angeles music scene of the early 1980s. His band, Gleaming Spires, had a cultish hit with their single, "Are You Ready For the Sex Girls," (if you ever saw *Revenge of the Nerds*, you know) and he was at the same time holding down a day job as the bass player with the band Sparks.

After this burgeoning career in rock and roll stopped burgeoning, Les found a job writing screenplays about rock and roll musicians whose careers had stopped burgeoning. But no one makes movies about rock and roll musicians whose careers etc, and so he wrote *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 5, The Horror Show* and bits and pieces of several other memorable epics. Eventually *Twenty Bucks*, which Les wrote based on a 1935 script by his father, Endre, (the apple didn't fall – Les's dad was a screenwriter and producer from the 1920s through the 1970s) was made. *Twenty Bucks*, which follows the path of a \$20 bill as it makes its way through the world, earned critical raves and several awards, including an Independent Spirit Award. Les's other screenwriting credits include *Daylight*, *Dante's Peak*, *The Alamo*, *Kid*, *Nowhere To Run*, *The Darkest Hour* and the mini-series, *Taken* which he wrote and executive produced (with Steven Spielberg.) and for which he won an Emmy award.

He has had songs recorded by Emmylou Harris, Randy Travis, Freddy Fender, Steve Gillette, Alvin (of the Chipmunks), and Misty Martinez, who, by the way, is awesome. His short stories have appeared in some rather embarrassing men's magazines, in a few horror anthologies, and most recently on Derek Haas' site, *Popcorn Fiction*, where two of his short stories, "DMT" and "Honeymoon" have been optioned and will hopefully be coming to a theater near you soon. Les's short novel, *Flight 505*, will be published by UpperRubberBoot this fall.



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

The Tunnel

William R. Soldan

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41

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The Tunnel

by William R. Soldan

WHEN CONSTRUCTION BEGAN THE EARTH TREMBLED. Multiple crews blasted and drilled their way through the hillside, and the shock that surged through the earth had birds fleeing from the trees and land-locked critters scurrying into their holes. By late summer, the conduit of the Grimm's Bridge Tunnel snaked its way through the hills, and with a final boom a crew out of Pittsburgh broke through the north portal leading toward Bieler's Run.

But the disturbance was felt by more than groundhogs and sparrows.

Somewhere deep within the bowels of the earth something awoke, something as old as the forest itself. Stirred from its primordial slumber, it threaded its way up through the strata. When it surfaced, seeping onto the wooded ground, it took in the air, filling its weak, ancient body with the assault of a new world.

Nocturnal by nature, the creature's vision offered little resource in the daytime, so it wormed its way through the trees relying on the minute vibrations in the ground and its keen sense of smell, an almost formless shape snuffling and suckling at the earth. And although it had little in common with other creatures, it shared one of their most fundamental needs—food.

It had been roused from its dormant state, and now it had their scent. The smell of their meat compelled the creature forward through the forest, an imperative slippery motion seeking only to feed.

Right around the time Henry Larson heard the news that the good ole U.S. of A. had officially put the proverbial boot up the Nazi's collective ass, he decided it was a good time to do something spontaneous. He'd always wanted to hop a train and just ride. Since he was a boy, he'd dreamt of swapping stories with other box-car transients and experiencing the unspoiled side of America that, in his opinion, was already starting to fade. Sure, he was no hobo, but the wheels of circumstance had brought him to what some call a jumping off point. His wife had left him, taking their boy, Henry Jr., to go live with her sister up near Ashtabula, and he'd lost his job at the mill after socking his foreman in the eye after a disagreement of some kind (no one ever knew the details, but rumor had it Henry had fallen off the wagon and come to work drunk). He didn't have much tying him down. Besides, he had a little money tucked away and felt that every

man should throw caution to the wind at least once in his life and do something completely out of character.

Henry told his landlord a story about going to visit some relatives in Pennsylvania and that he didn't know when he'd be coming back. When Monday morning of the following week came, Henry called Betty at her sister's place and told her he'd be leaving town for a little while. He did this more for his boy's sake than out of any courtesy toward his wife. "Tell Henry Jr. that his daddy loves him and that I'll come see him real soon, you hear?" he'd told her, and she'd barely said two words in response. After he hung up he put together a sack of clothes. That very afternoon he jumped a train on the Youngstown and Southern Railroad, bound for wherever fate saw fit. His stomach fluttered and his heart hammered in his chest as he watched the train wheeling by, looking for an open car to jump onto, and all the while he thought about his son and how Betty would have to explain to the boy what had happened to his daddy if he missed the car by even an inch.

But fortune favored Henry and he made it safely onto an open car. His pulse returned to normal once he was sitting against the wall opposite the open door, the scenery whipping past.

He knew that the Y&S rails had recently merged with those of the Pittsburgh Coal Company and figured he'd take them to the end of the line. When the train reached its destination, he decided, he'd simply hop another one. Maybe he'd make his way south, he thought; he'd always wanted to visit the gulf. Hell, maybe he'd even head out west.

It was shortly before entering Columbiana County that Henry made the acquaintance of a bona fide hobo named Charlie who'd jumped aboard as the train rolled through Beaver Township. Looking at the man's deeply creased features and ash-colored hair, Henry guessed Charlie to be about sixty, at least thirty years his senior. Charlie knew right away that Henry wasn't a seasoned train-hopper, judging by his clean shaven face and sturdy work boots, but he didn't hold it against him. "First time riding the rails, eh," Charlie said, tobacco spit leaking from his lip into his scraggly beard.

"Yep. Always wanted to go on an adventure, and this seemed like just that."

"Well, it's good to meet ya', and there's no better way to travel if ya' ask me, no sir. Trains let ya' see the real country. They take ya' places roads can't go, sure enough."

"Where ya' headed, Charlie?"

"Same place you are, I 'spect—wherever the tracks take me. I been all over the country in cars like this here."

Henry liked this man. He had a way about him; his manner put Henry at ease with his decision to just get up and go, which he'd begun second guessing as soon as he saw how fast the train was moving along the track when he was looking to

jump.

Charlie rummaged through his satchel, pulling out a bottle with no label. He uncapped it and took a hearty swig before offering it to Henry.

"Here ya' go," he said. "To the uninitiated."

Henry took the bottle and sniffed its contents; the fumes made his nostrils burn.

"Go on now," Charlie said. "It'll do ya' right."

Henry hesitated (booze seemed to bring him nothing but trouble these days), but the bum's crooked grin charmed him and he took a swig, doing his best to keep a straight face as the whiskey bit the back of his throat. He handed it back with a look on his mug that made Charlie cackle with laughter and slap his knee.

"Told ya' it'd do you right," he said. "Now you're official, Henry, m'boy. Welcome to the club."

"Thanks," Henry said, the hooch already beginning to chew at the lining of his stomach.

He wasn't sure where they were. The scenery had all looked pretty much the same since Charlie hopped on. Not that he was too familiar with the towns south of Youngstown anyway. Truthfully, he'd never been past North Lima. But as the train rolled on, Charlie said they were coming up on a tunnel that passed through the little burg of Grimm's Bridge, near East Liverpool, and gave Henry a brief history.

"Yeah, I been through here a few times," he said with pride. "The tunnel was finished in '33 but it wasn't till '34 or '35 they started runnin' coal."

As Charlie told the story, he stepped to the edge of the box-car and started urinating off the train just as it entered the smooth concrete tube in the hillside. The tunnel's walls were a grimy, brownish-yellow, and the musty smell reminded Henry of the root cellar they had when he was a boy.

The train chugged into complete darkness, and Henry sat back against the wall of the car while the whiskey sloshed around in his gut and his new friend yammered on in his creaky old voice.

"Yep, this here tunnel was worked on by at least four different companies. Took 'em a while to get through--"

Henry was daydreaming and didn't notice that Charlie had suddenly gone quiet. But something snapped him out of his reverie: a thud on the floor of the car, like a dropped sack of potatoes. He noticed the mustiness in the tunnel had turned foul, like something was rotting in the darkness.

"Charlie?"

In the dark, Henry couldn't see why his companion hadn't replied—at least not at first.

As the train neared the south portal, daylight began creeping back in, and moments later he saw the source of the thud.

There, lying on the floor at the edge of the car was Charlie—or rather, what was left of him.

His lower body lay there, spurting blood from the waist where his top half had been detached, his genitals hanging from the fly of his worn trousers like a shriveled slug.

The sight of Charlie's legs and the pool slowly forming around them made Henry's gut do a flip. He tried to scream but vomited instead, spewing cheap liquor and stomach acid all over the remains of the man he'd just met.

In his repulsion and terror, Henry kicked the legs over the edge of the train and screamed, this time successfully.

The box-car came into the light of day, and that's when Henry reluctantly looked back into the tunnel's gaping gullet.

Several yards in he saw something gray, like boiled meat, coiling around Charlie's lower half and dragging it, inch by inch, into the shadows. When the feet had disappeared and all that was left was a red smear in the dirt beside the track, Henry sat on the edge of the car, careful not to touch the puddle of blood that was beginning to run toward the back wall. Then, with his feet dangling over the side like a child on a bench, he proceeded to lose his mind.

The creature slithered back through the crevice at the base of the tunnel wall and into the earth below. It had dwelled here since the blasts more than ten years earlier had roused it from the depths. It was slower moving than usual, dividing its strength between crawling and clutching the legs tight enough to pull them underground. The top part of the body had been devoured almost instantly, sating the creature's hunger enough that it was taking the remainder below for later consumption. It had learned quickly that sustenance was scarce, particularly in the winter months, so it stored what it could.

It spent most of its time feeding on deer and other animals large enough to quell its needs. But even the beasts of the forest were rare these days, their instincts telling them to give this place a wide berth. And lacking sufficient strength and mobility, venturing far beyond the tunnel for food was difficult, so the creature's inherently rapid evolution slowed.

The few construction workers it had managed to absorb into its gelatin-like state years earlier had provided enough fuel to precipitate its development, but the creature's system required much more. It needed a steady supply of meat in order to grow beyond the sticky, slithering mass it had become.

So it languished, sustaining itself on the intermittent supply of the forest. Having survived through centuries, it was patient. It knew how to wait.

When Emily Davis never came home in the fall of 1979, her parents worried that she'd run away. But in reality she'd merely gone on a long walk with her border collie, Max.

Max was excited as they crossed the trestle into the woods. He ran ahead, chasing birds and kicking up leaves, his tail a wagging blur. He found a particularly nice stick in a brush pile, and offered it with enthusiasm to his master. He was a smart dog. Every time Emily threw his new toy, he pounced off along the path and brought it right back, smiling his loyal canine grin.

Yet by the time they neared the place where the train tracks entered the hillside, Emily had grown tired of playing fetch. Her final, half-hearted throw was poorly aimed and the branch careened into the darkness of the vandalized old tunnel. Max eagerly chased after but a minute later returned without it. He stood whimpering, facing into the darkness, his tail between his legs.

"What is it, you goofy mutt? Is there something in there?"

Max cowered there at her feet. If he could speak, he would plead with her to take him home.

"Should we have a look?"

The dog was backing away, trying to make Emily understand, but her innate curiosity compelled her to see what had spooked him.

As Max saw his master disappear inside, he let out a whine, beckoning her to return. And when he heard her scream, the whine became a low growl.

Emily reappeared, hobbling, and Max rose from his anxious position feeling a flicker of relief. But his master's face frightened him back into submission. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth was open.

He'd worked up enough resolve to begin barking, sensing that something about the girl's appearance wasn't quite right. And just as Emily stumbled into the light, she tripped, falling face first into the cinders beside the rusted rails.

Something had hold of her ankles.

She screamed and clawed at the ground, but the something was quickly on top of her, enveloping her into its folds, its slimy form stretching and wrapping around Emily like taffy. Content with its grasp, it began slinking backward into the tunnel, one of the girl's dirty, lacerated arms trailing from it gooey bulk like a rigid tongue.

Max tilted his head, confused, but with his master gone he could only whimper and let loose his bladder in the autumn leaves.

When she didn't return, Max found his way home. It was late evening by then. When he arrived alone, shaking and whining, Emily's parents called the police.

Emily Davis was one of many that went missing that year.

Meanwhile, the creature was growing in size and strength. Patience, it seemed, brought rewards.

"Dammit, Joey!" Mike yelled, "Come out from there you little shit!"

"I'm sorry, Mike. I just wanted to see it," the boy pleaded. "I knew you'd say no if I asked."

"Damn right I would've!"

Earlier, Joey had overheard his big brother, Mike, on the phone making plans to drive down to East Liverpool to check out the old haunted tunnel where all those kids got murdered back in the seventies (or so the story goes). Joey had been hearing the stories since he was little. Mike always tried to scare him, saying he'd take him down and feed him to the Grimm's Bridge Monster if he didn't obey his every command. He knew there was no such thing as monsters, but Joey's ten-year-old imagination still got the best of him sometimes, and he'd have to sleep with the bedroom door open and the hall light on, even though the tunnel was in the next county.

Now that he was a little older, though, he wanted to prove to his big brother that he wasn't scared anymore. And when he overheard Mike on the phone with his girlfriend, Rachel, he knew this was his chance. He just had to see the place and show Mike he wasn't chicken.

So here they were, on the side of the road.

Mike had glanced into the rear-view mirror before pulling out of the parking lot of the party shop. That's when he saw Joey's tuft of red hair as his head peeked up from the bed of the truck. To teach the kid a lesson, he drove up the road a bit before slamming on the breaks, making Joey fly forward with a thud and a grunt.

"Come on, Mike," said Rachel, standing on the road's soft shoulder in the same denim mini-skirt she always wore, her dishwater hair pulled into a high ponytail. "Stop being so mean. Let him come along. He's not hurtin' no one."

One thing about Rachel Motts was she was always nice to Joey. Mike would often joke that if she liked Joey so much maybe she should take him home with her.

"I think we should just leave him," said Todd Gaines, Mike's sleazy best friend, a high school dropout with crooked teeth and bloodshot eyes.

Mike finally caved and told Joey he could come as long as he kept his mouth shut and stayed out of his way. And if he cried or pissed himself because he was scared, Mike assured him, he would leave him.

"Just get in the back of the fuckin' truck and keep outta' sight," he said, brushing

greasy red hair from his pimply forehead. "I don't want you gettin' us pulled over."

Joey did as he was told and lied down in the bed of the pick-up as Rachel climbed in the cab and scooted into the middle, so Todd could get in beside her.

As they cruised along the winding roads of Columbiana County, the truck parted the muggy summer air and Joey gazed up at the stars.

After a while, turning off the main road, they drove a little further before parking and getting out of the truck with their flashlights, a twelve-pack of Stroh's, and a bag with a couple bottles clanking inside.

Walking through the woods, Joey struggled to keep pace with the three of them.

The clearing at the mouth of the tunnel, just beside the tracks, was littered with broken bottles and there were some battered old lawn chairs in a circle. Ever since the train stopped running, this place had become somewhere kids dared each other to go and teenagers brought whatever they could pilfer from their folks' liquor cabinets. The pit was an old rusty truck rim set up on bricks. They gathered some twigs and some paper trash that was scattered about to start a fire, and it didn't take them long to get it going.

Then they got drunk. Well, not Joey, of course; he sat on a log, staring at the tunnel. The flickering light of the fire cast dancing shadows on its cracked, graffiti-covered walls, and he could vaguely make out the shapes of spray-painted hearts and swear words and what looked like a big star in a circle. The south end had collapsed years earlier, and now the bottom was full of stagnant water. It was a spooky place, Joey thought, and now that he was there, he was beginning to feel maybe he was chicken, after all.

As Joey sat there on his stump, Mike told the story about the murders and did his best to make the details as graphic as possible. "After cutting the bodies into pieces," he informed, pausing to guzzle some beer, "the killer ate all the flesh and meat and threw the bones into the water. But then there's others who say it wasn't a man at all—it was a thing that lives under there." He gestured toward the sludge that filled the bottom of the tunnel and collected in a swampy pool at its entrance. Beer cans and used condoms floated in the scum on top like dead things.

"My grandpa told me about it once," he continued. "He said he saw a man get ripped clean in half while they were on a train passing through there and saw his legs get dragged off by something with arms like gray jelly."

"That's disgusting," Rachel said, looking like she'd just tasted something awful. "This place is creepy. Can we go soon?"

"Aw, relax. My grandpa was a crazy old coot. It's just a buncha' bullshit."

There were several large rocks sticking up from the muck, and as Mike told the tale, Todd began climbing one of them and stood atop it, so drunk he almost fell

over. He hurled his Mad Dog bottle, smashing it against the tunnel's concrete wall, and turned back to the others with both hands raised like he was holding up an invisible medal. His white T-shirt had purple wine stains on it that looked like drops of blood in the fire's glow.

"Quit being an asshole," Rachel shouted, moving closer to Mike.

"Yeah, quit fuckin' around," Mike added, putting an arm around her and tossing an empty can into the fire with his free hand.

Joey watched as Todd almost fell again and thought about what Mike had said about their grandpa. The old man had died before Joey was born, and Mike had never told him that story.

"Mike," Joey said, walking to join him and Rachel, "can we go home now?"

"I thought I told you to keep your mouth shut, runt."

"He's right, Mike," Rachel chimed, "let's go. This isn't fun anymore. And something stinks."

"Jesus Christ!" he snapped. "If you're all gonna' be a bunch of pussies, fine. Todd...let's get the fuck outta' here!"

But Todd didn't respond.

"Todd!" Mike yelled again. "Where the hell is that dickhead."

Mike wandered over toward the rock where they'd last seen Todd swaying like a drunken fool. At the opening of the tunnel, he shouted again: "Todd! Come on! Or I'm leaving you here!" Mike's voice boomed through the tunnel and echoed back.

He finally gave up, turning around and shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, we can't leave without him," he said.

Both Rachel and Joey were staring at Mike with ridiculous looks on their faces and screams stuck in their throats.

"What the hell's with you two?"

There was a smell like sewage as it rose out of the water. The thing's legs, which sprouted from its backside and looked like rotten squash, elevated it nearly as high as the top arch of the tunnel. Its body was an oozing, prune-shaped glob out of which intestine-like tendrils grew and writhed, and the top of the mass was a cluster of open sores.

Rachel and Joey finally overcame their muteness, shrieking in unison.

"What the —?" Mike began as he heard the slithering sound behind him.

As he turned, the prune opened, splitting down the center. Its seeping tentacles latched on to Mike, dividing him, pulling in the two halves like a fisherman reeling in a wriggling trout. Mike Larson's still conscious mind allowed him to see, in his last seconds, dozens of tiny eyes. They were the cloudy, milky color of cataracts, and blinked atop the monstrosity's squirming head. As its body, now a cavern of teeth, pulsing and leaking like an infected blister, closed around him, Mike let out

one last scream before he was silenced forever.

As the creature devoured his brother, Joey fled to the truck with Rachel. And only by God's grace were the keys still in the ignition.

Rachel drove recklessly, almost rolling them as she took a turn too fast. But once they were back on the main road she slowed a bit and managed to keep the truck straight all the way home to North Lima.

"What the hell was that thing!?" Rachel sobbed, her hands trembling. Despite the darkness behind them, she kept checking the mirror, expecting that thing to leap into the back of the truck, hungry for more.

Joey Larson was surprisingly calm (though he planned on freaking out good and proper in the safety of his own bedroom). "It's real," he said quietly, staring out the window. "The stories are true."

But that was all he could muster.

They never spoke of what really happened. No one would believe them anyway. Joey's parents assumed that Mike had run off somewhere with that trouble maker, Todd Gaines, and when Rachel was found dead a year later after taking an entire bottle of sleeping pills, everyone assumed that was the reason.

But as he got older, Joey knew that the real reason was that Rachel just couldn't live with what they'd seen that night. He struggled himself. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he still woke screaming with the image of his brother being ripped in half seared into his mind. Each time it happened, he thought of Rachel Motts, dead on her bathroom floor, and wondered if he might end up the same way.

As the Grimm's Bridge Monster grew and grew, so did its hunger. And as the legend stitched itself into the fabric of the land, it waited. It had all the time in the world.

The End.

Case #64340



William R. Soldan

William R. Soldan graduated with his BA in English from Youngstown State University and is currently a student in the Northeast Ohio MFA program, where he studies Fiction Writing. He's the grateful husband of an amazing woman named Rebecca Jane and the obnoxiously proud father of a baby boy named Spencer Thomas. He's previously had work published in The Raw Alternative, Quail Bell, Danse Macabre, and Sanitarium. When he's not working as a personal trainer or acting as fiction-editor of the Jenny online literary magazine, William enjoys good books, bad movies, lifting very heavy things over his head, and consuming dangerously high quantities of caffeine—among other ridiculous things. You can follow him on twitter @RustWriter1 (though he's new to the tweeting game) or find him on Facebook (as Bill Soldan).



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1

The Bone Factory (Leisure Fiction) by Nate Kenyon

2 *The Omega's Mate: (Book 8) by E A Price*

3 *Ash - James Herbert*

4 *Zomblog Saga Box Set by TW Brown*

5 *Swan Song by Robert R. McCammon*

6 *Doctor Sleep: Shining Book 2 by Stephen King*

7 *The Haunting of Harriet by Jennifer Button*

8 *The Enemy by Charlie Higson*

9 *Fourteen Days by Steven Jenkins*

10 *The Shining by Stephen King*

Compiled August 1st - August 31st 2014
Amazon.com Kindle Chart

Bestselling Horror US

1

Abandon by Blake Crouch

2 *Pines by Blake Crouch*

3 *Wayward by Blake Crouch*

4 *The Last Town - Blake Crouch*

5 *The Line (Witching Savannah Book 1) by J. D. Horn*

6 *The Source (Witching Savannah Book 2) by J.D. Horn*

7 *Where the Dead Walk by John Bowen*

8 *The Green Mile - Stephen King*

9 *Mr. Mercedes: A Novel by Stephen King*

10 *The Omega's Mate: (Book 8) by E A Price*

Compiled August 1st -August 31st 2014
Amazon.co.uk Kindle Chart

Group Therapy 09.14

The Hope Spot: The Bare Bones of the Vampire Myth, Part Two

By R. Donald James Gauvreau

Last month we began discussing some of the common patterns in folkloric vampires and how we could use them to make a vampire that felt new, but still fit within this preexisting framework. We started with the “life cycle” of the vampire and their methods of feeding, and will now conclude with Appearance and Fighting Vampires.

Appearance

Again, just so we’re clear: No fangs. That’s a relatively recent invention. Vampires generally look like people, often but not always like the people they were before they turned, and this is one of their great strengths. Some vampires can’t even be identified except by catching them in the act of feeding.

They can be pale or dark, but most especially can be ruddy, and this because of blood. They can swell after feeding, like ticks, or even be covered with or be leaking blood. Unusual, but not inhuman, attributes are also possible: missing fingers or limbs, widow’s peaks, or red hair and blue eyes, are all relatively common traits.

Vampires may also be invisible or otherwise unidentifiable except to

dhampirs (and sometimes others, like twins). That is to say, if there is a test that can be performed to identify a vampire (making it hold a cross, to pull something out of the top of my head), then it may only work if a certain kind of person is administering the test.

In Practice: Jellypires continued

In the last article we gave our vampires a multi-stage life cycle. In the first stage... well, let’s just make them look like shadows. Indistinct, amorphous, more like canvasses of darkness than figures. Lethifolds, not shadow people, yeah?

The second stage of the vampire is “gelatinous, boneless,” as developing vampires are in some regions. They don’t need to be the Blob, though. We’ll cheat with definitions and give them some cartilage but rely more on a muscular system like we see in octopi and squids, something dense and extensive enough that they have (admittedly substandard) mobility.

Given that, they probably prefer to move through water, which gives us a whole host of interesting (and terrifying) scenarios. It also gives us a clue as to where they store their prey as they wait for the corpses to

age.

Finally, the true vampire looks as it did in life (or as the original vampire of the lineage did).

A vampire at any stage of development casts no reflection in a mirror, but only if the mirror is held by someone directly descended from one of the vampire's parents (or its progenitor's parents).

So we see why vampires usually feed on their family members first, I guess. And yet, they're hard to catch. A not-yet-undead vampire, still fully mortal, can be distinguished only by its behavior. A pre-vampire slowly becomes more sociopathic as it grows up, but the smarter ones will quickly learn how to put on an act for others and, hopefully, escape detection.

I smell a retelling of Polidori's *The Vampyre* here...

Fighting Vampires

You can't just let a vampire run amok, after all. So how do you deal with it?

Curative, purifying substances seem to come up a lot. Not just holy water but boiling water of any kind. Alcohol, too (usually whiskey or wine). It can be buried with the vampire, either so that the vampire will get too sloshed to make a proper attack (the most unorthodox tactic I've heard of yet) or so that the vampire's family members can dig it up if their loved one turns into a vampire, drink it, and gain some kind of protection from the vampire.

As we mentioned in the last article, vampires are obsessed with counting seeds and stuff: they feed on life. This appears to have developed into a

general obsession with counting stuff, though, and in addition to poppy seeds and millet you eventually find vampires counting grains of sand on the ground.

Thresholds, whether these come in the form of bridges, running water, or doors, are usually barred to the vampire in some way. It may be unable to cross at all or simply require assistance of some kind.

While the "vampires versus werewolves" thing certainly seems to be a modern invention, vampires actually didn't get along with wolves in folklore, and in some cases it was advised to, for example, let wolves eat the corpse.

Sunlight is usually bad for a vampire, but it was only deadly as of recent times. More traditionally the sunlight discomforts or depowers the vampire or inconveniences it in some other way.

Lastly, and more traditionally, we find bodily mutilation. Stakes, of course, but a corpse suspected of being a vampire can be pierced with needles so that the blood leaks out. The body may also be shot (sometimes after the coffin is closed so that the bullet passes through both coffin and corpse) or the tendons cut. A scythe may be positioned in the coffin so that if the corpse rises it will decapitate itself, or the head may be removed all at first and buried away from the neck (usually between the legs or far from the body entirely).

In Practice: Jellypires concluded

Sunlight is uncomfortable, even weakening, for vampires in the second and third stage but outright

lethal for vampires in the shadow stage. Vampires that need to limit their reproduction for some reason can force their progeny into sunlight and dispose of them in this way. While older vampires are more resistant to blatantly self-destructive commands, the shadows are almost entirely under their progenitor's control (but not the progenitor of their progenitor, so there comes a point when a vampire simply cannot effectively control the spread of vampirism anymore if it let the situation alone previously and can't force its developed progeny to see its reasoning).

Oak, ash, and hawthorn are the woods most commonly said to be capable of destroying a vampire. We'll go with ash as being the necessary wood from which you make your stakes. Ash is associated with repelling serpents, which makes this parallel vampires. Another point of comparison is in the water-loving second stage vampires, as snakes are mythematically Water Monsters (which are in turn associated with the destruction of life and the world tree).

A vampire in its first and second stages is still tied to its corpse, and destroying the corpse's heart with a weapon made from ash wood will destroy the vampire. After it reaches the third stage it has no need of the corpse and must be staked personally.

Its progeny, however, are similarly dependent on its survival until they, too, reach the third stage.

Simply removing the heart of a vampire will do nothing if it is still developing, but fully-developed vampires will slip into a deep sleep until their heart is destroyed or returned, and the same fate will befall their progeny. One would only wish to do this if there was no way to procure ash wood.

Burying a vampire with alcohol will imbue the alcohol with protective properties. Anyone who drinks even a small amount will be protected, but only for a night, so supplies are viciously guarded and rationed out (there may also be people who intentionally try to make vampires in order to get more anti-vampire alcohol).

Fire's no good past a certain stage, actually. A first or second stage vampire that was once mortal will die if its corpse is destroyed by fire, but a third stage vampire destroyed by fire will reform as a shadow to start all over again, and any progeny it may have made will be unaffected (which means that if any exist for it to leech sustenance from, the vampire may actually return more powerful than before).

Wolves, on the other hand? Let's throw in a Romulus-and-Remus

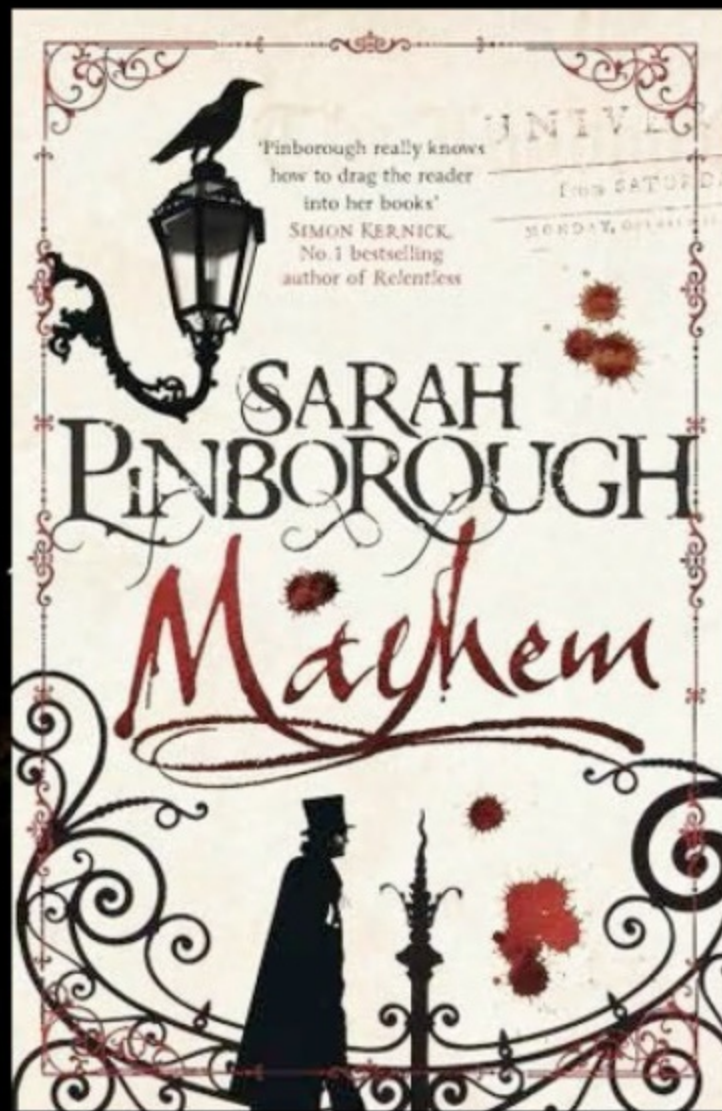
kind of myth about the founders of the people. Whatever the truth of the nobility's supposed wolfish origins, there's definitely a connection between wolves and vampires. The storytellers say it's because the wolves hate the perversion of their mother's blood that vampires represent, but who can say for sure? At any rate, wolves will do what fire cannot, and can even ignore the insubstantiality of a vampire in its shadow stage.

About R. Donald James Gauvreau

R. Donald James Gauvreau works an assortment of odd jobs, most involving batteries. He maintains a blog at www.whitemarbleblock.blogspot.com, where he regularly posts story ideas, free fiction, and other goodies, including a free guide to comparative mythology that was written specifically with worldbuilding in mind.

He is probably not a spider.

REVIEWS



MAYHEM BY SARAH PINBOROUGH

This has to be one of the best novels I've read in a long time.

Dr Bond, a doctor in Victorian England, is asked by the police to look into the Jack the Ripper killings. As more bodies appear on the streets of London, it becomes clear to Bond that there are two murders at work and that, as horrific as Jack may be, the Thames Torso Killer is far worse. With some unlikely and unexpected allies, he sets out to track down the killer to protect not only London but also the people he loves. Throw in a growing opium habit and some supernatural shenanigans, and you have yourself one hell of a read.

If you are, like me, a huge fan of "The Terror" by Dan Simmons, then this should be the next book on your

reading list. Sarah started out in pure horror but has taken a step sideways into historical crime. "Mayhem" shows just how at home in this genre she is. She blends historical fact with fantastic fiction, until you can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

As a fellow female writer of horror, Sarah's books have been on my reading list for a while, but what really prompted me to read "Mayhem" was an article she wrote about how she had researched the historical elements. It was a thoughtful and detailed article which made me want to read the book itself.

There were a few bits at the beginning as she settles into her style that jarred a little. For example, I'm not sure how your insides can feel greasy, tired or frustrated. However, about halfway through the book I was so absorbed that she could have told me grass was purple and birds fly backwards, and I would have accepted that. The pace was good, with the tension broken by lovely sections of often black humour – the reporter's dog coming to mind as one example.

As with all good fiction, the strength of "Mayhem" is its characters. Each one is distinct, every one is engaging, and our flawed hero (Bond) grabs your sympathies from page one. Her pairings of characters are well conceived, such as the logical Bond and the zealous priest, or Moore and Andrews. The horror elements too

were well-written; the descriptions of the murders were gruesomely accurate, while the supernatural elements were strong but subtle. After reading about the upir's first appearance, I confess to being incredibly creeped out when my daughter asked for a piggyback ride.

There is enough suspense, gore and supernatural events in this book to satisfy a horror fan, while the historical elements will appeal to a more general reader. Check it out, and see if your shadow looks the same way again.

- See more at: <http://gingernutsofhorror.com/4/post/2014/09/review-mayhem-by-sarah-pinborough.html#sthash.V7ZEYtJw.dpuf>



Charlotte has had several short stories published in various formats from print to electronic and even audio. She has a novella out with Screaming Dreams publications, and a short story anthology due out this year. She is currently

working on a novel and some radio productions.

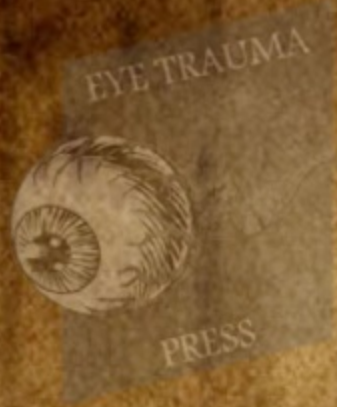
Charlotte is thrilled to join the Ginger Nuts of Horror team, and is looking forward to indulging in two of her favourite things - reading new books and spouting opinions.

Originally from North Yorkshire, Charlotte now lives in Leeds and that's as far south as she's prepared to go. She is married and lives with a small child and a very fluffy cat. One of them is a small bundle of hurricane-level energy which tears up everything it passes; the other leaves hairballs wherever it sits. It is left up to the reader to decide which is which. -

See more at: <http://gingernutsofhorror.com/4/post/2014/09/review-mayhem-by-sarah-pinborough.html#sthash.V7ZEYtJw.dpuf>

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Crossroad by Marie Robinson
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The Inner Eye

Dempsey Wilson

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

THE INNER EYE

by Dempsey Wilson

SEATED IN A WHEELCHAIR AND FACING his bedroom window, Carlton stared out at the leaves tumbling across the yard, pushed along by a light, autumn breeze. He suddenly winced in pain, as he did more and more these days, thanks to the two golf ball sized tumors in his brain.

Though he was alone in the room, he began to speak out loud, as if having a conversation with an unseen friend.

"The pain, it torments me so."

"Yes, I see the source of your pain. I have watched it grow. And, I feel it, too."

"Can you help me, then?"

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"Because, I am but an observer, ill-equipped to act."

"But you speak to me. You are real. You have a name!"

"Yes, I am real. And, I am Charles, because you named me so."

"You have, all my life, pointed me in the right direction. Kept me from making mistakes. You have

helped me countless times. Why can you not help me now? The pain is so insistent."

"I have told you why, Carl."

"But, I don't understand."

"I know."

"You say you can see the source of my pain, my cancer, so why can you not remove it?"

"Because, I have no hands with which to grasp it."

"Then you will let me die?"

"I can do nothing to help you. And, it is we who will die. I am a part of you, have you forgotten this?"

"If you are truly a part of me, then why will you not try to help?"

"I have told you already, I cannot help. I am unable to help. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. But, the pain – it's getting worse."

"I know. Your time – our time is almost up."

"I'm scared."

"Don't be. Your pain is coming to an end."

"Will I see you in heaven?"

"I don't know."

EXCERPT FROM SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN MAGAZINE, JULY ISSUE, 2008.

Last month, nineteen year-old Carlton Brisk of Washington State, lost his four-year battle with brain cancer. Mr. Brisk suffered from Glioblastoma Multiforme, the most aggressive malignant glioma, which in itself, isn't so rare. It was what Dr. Ian Rawlston, the Coroner who conducted the autopsy, found when he opened up Mr. Brisk's cranium that has the scientific community talking.

As Dr. Rawlston cut into the anterior two-thirds of the Cerebral Hemispheres to remove the tumors, he found a fully formed, emerald-green eyeball, which happened to be the same color as Mr. Brisk's eyes, and part of a malformed orbital socket. Mr. Brisk was originally thought to have two tumors, yet one turned out to be something else entirely.

"I've read about the assimilation or absorption, if you will, of one twin by the other, while still in the early stages of formation inside the mother's womb," said Dr. Rawlston. "But, the odd thing about this case is the eyeball seemed functional. In addition, I'd like to note that the pupil was fixed and dilated, as if it had once been alive. In the few other cases of absorbed twins, the eye or mouth or whatever survived the absorption was ill formed. In one case, doctors found one milky eyeball, and even a few rotted teeth set in a partial lower gum socket, but they were all dysfunctional. The eye found in Mr. Brisk's brain seemed completely normal – completely functional."

Though Dr. Rawlston admits to being fascinated with this discovery, he says the most intriguing thing of all was the location of the eyeball. "The eye was placed directly across from the tumor, just a few millimeters away, as though it was looking right at it."

When the parents of Mr. Brisk were informed of this anomaly, they were shocked, but not completely surprised. Both parents say they remember hearing Carlton speak to what they thought was an imaginary friend, whom he often referred to as "Charles."

The End.

Case #51072

Dempsey Wilson

To date, Dempsey Wilson has 34 published short stories. The following are a few of his favorites: Through the Eyes of a Killer- published Dec. 08 by Mind Wings Audio, and currently available at Ether Mobile Publishing (2011) and Audible.com, as well as the Kindle store at Amazon.com. The Blajini Next Door- published June 2009 in 69 Flavors of Paranoia magazine. Shadow Kitties-published March of 2009 in One Real Story's annual anthology. Ryers Canyon-published March 2012 by Black Label Books in their Stories for the Damned anthology. And most recently, his stories Whatever You Want, and Fear Itself were published in Blood And Guts Anthology, and Bloody Ghost Stories Anthology.



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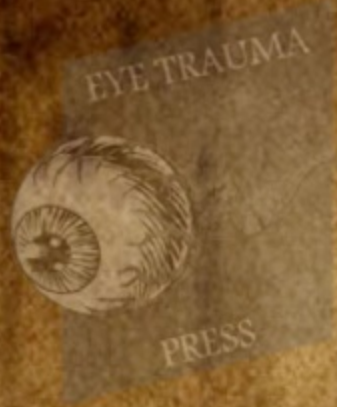
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The Flea Circus

Joe Prosit

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

The Flea Circus

by Joe Prosit

MY VOICE HAS TO SHOW NO SIGNS OF UNCERTAINTY. I'm inside my trailer, rehearsing my lines inside my head. Even in here, just minutes before curtain call, I can still hear the rest of my troupe, whining and complaining. "Oh god damn it, will you people shut up!"

Ladies and gentlemen! Prepare yourself for a show yet unseen! For images your eyes will not understand! Prepare to be amazed at the spectacle set before you tonight for your viewing pleasure! For beasts and beauties! Grace and gallantry! For the joy of a child's laughter and the sorrow of broken souls! Ladies and gentlemen, children and children-at-heart! Welcome to the circus!

I have to focus. I have to summon all my confidence and bravery as I prepare myself for the big show. A touch of rouge on each cheek. A wisp of black under the eyes. Beeswax sculpts my moustache with just the slightest suggestion of a twist. I dust my lapels and shoot my cuffs. After all, this is show business and all the details must be attended to.

When the time comes for the opening spotlight to fall on me in the center ring, I can't be me. I can't afford to be this small and scared man, bankrupt and bullied by my own troupe, unsure if the audience could see past all the glamor and make-up. No. I have to be larger than life. I have to be the boisterous Ringleader, welcoming them to a world they could never imagine. It's what the people demand.

My thumb and finger wind a key and set my old flea circus in motion just as if it's a pocket watch. I imagine my human circus much like this old parlor trick. So simple but satisfying. Every invisible flea moving just as it should.

I close my eyes and rehearse my lines. As the words play in my ears, I can finally shut out theirs.

From parts unknown, bringing forth wild beasts from the Dark Continent, armed with nothing but his steeled nerves and a bullwhip! In the center ring, I give you the Lion Tamer!

Yes. Yes. That sounds good. My voice has to boom and fill every corner of the big top. It has to pump life into every vessel both in the stands and in the rings. The Lion Tamer will be up first. The kiddies always love the lion. The king of the jungle! They'll jump at the crack of the man's whip and the lion's gnashing yellowed teeth. They'll awe at the illusion of instant reflexes and the Lion Tamer's

dance with death.

I hear my troupe again, still moaning outside. "Shut your rotten mouths or I'll bury you, I swear it!" They should be in their places. The show is about to begin. Don't these people have any concept of showmanship? Of professionalism?

No. I'll only hear problems from the likes of them. The food is spoiled. The equipment is old. The animals are too vicious. The schedule is too demanding. The pay is too meager. Will they never cease? They have no idea how to run a show like this. They have no knowledge of the logistics involved. These hacks! These prima donnas! But I fixed them.

I put my hands over my ears to block out their nagging and concentrate on my next lines. After the Lion Tamer comes the Contortionist.

Lads and ladies! If you would be so kind as to direct your gaze to the far ring and the splendor of Madame Abigail, from the city of lights and romance: Paris, France! The Contortionist!

She is the most beautiful of them all. And so much more limber than before. I myself removed her human limitations. I worked her joints and muscles and sinew into the human sculpture she has become. So fluid now. She moves without any strain or sweat. A perfectly poseable doll. Her face ever gorgeous. But will they see the strings?

No. I have to eradicate doubt. I must remind myself that the audience is a willing participant. With their minds and with their eyes they perform just as much as my troupe. When they see the Lion Tamer react, they see his muscles and nerves fire on impulses from his brain. When they see the Contortionist twist, they see the long hours of her training. When they see the Sisters on the trapeze, they see their skill. I have to have at least as much faith as they.

I have to focus on my lines and ignore the voices.

I humbly present to you now, from the mysterious land of rupees and riches, tsars and revolutions, barren steppes and boundless wilderness... Behold! The Sisters Emerencia high above your seats on the trapeze, performing without a net!

The trapeze! A fan favorite! And so easy to work the strings. My god, they almost pull themselves. Yes. Yes. This will work. This will do more than just work. This will be the best performance the world has ever seen! And it is all because of me!

How can I doubt myself? Haven't I already proven myself stronger and more willing than all the rest? Haven't I done all the work to bring this to be? It was me! Just last night I visited each one of them while they slept. I am the one who made them better than they ever could have been in life. I was the one who pushed them beyond their natural limits. I was the one who shucked them of their mortal burden and silenced their all too human flaws.

My suit and makeup are all in place. Every stitch, stroke and detail are just so. Like the clowns and the mimes and the strong man and the stilt walkers, everything is

ready now. All the ropes are taunt.

I brush past my old flea circus on the way out of my trailer. I have to thank it for the inspiration. Those tiny invisible fleas helped me see the future of this all too human show. But I have to leave childish things to children. I grab my stove pipe hat. My shined Jack boots echo down the steps of my trailer.

"Everything okay, boss? Who were you yelling at in there?" McFarlane, the chief stagehand, says to me. We picked him up outside of an asylum I believe. Such a willing partner.

"Nevermind that. They can't hear me anymore anyway," I tell him. As we march across the grounds, we duck under and step over the network of ropes and anchors. "Have all the preparations been made? Are all the gears wound?"

"Everything's set," McFarlane says.

When I speak to him again, my voice isn't my own. It is strong and loud and commanding. The voice of the Ringleader. "Excellent! It is imperative than none of you miss a cue! Every string must be pulled at precisely the right moment!"

"You got it, boss," he says, and I trust him.

I enter the big top. All the lights are down. I make my memorized way to the center ring through the darkness. The crowd is full of chatter and murmurs, excitement and anticipation. Only their energy can truly silence the whining and crying and screaming of my troupe now. I will play them like a puppet master. The crowd. The troupe. All of them. I'll pull all their strings!

"Ladies and gentlemen! Children and children-at-heart! Prepare to be amazed by the spectacle set before you! Tonight, you are willing participants as only your eyes and imagination can truly bring this show to life! Feats to amaze! Visions sure to dazzle! Mysteries guaranteed to confound the mind! Behold the wonders from around the globe! Welcome to the Cooper and King's Cavalcade Circus!"

Do they notice the wires? The seepage from the Contortionist's limbs? The breathless still lungs of the trapeze artist? The blood stains on the acrobat's costume? Do they notice McFarlane and his crew yanking and working the ropes in rhythm with the movements of the clowns? Can they see through the grease paint on my face to the cowardly man underneath?

I look into their beautiful sparkling eyes, and I see they believe!

The End.

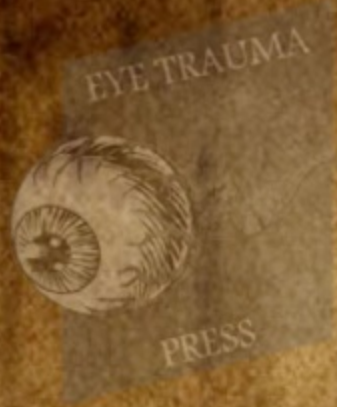
Case #57559

Joe Prosit

Joe Prosit writes horror and science fiction short stories and novellas. Several are available at his website, www.JoeProsit.com. He lives with his wife and kids in the Brainerd Lakes Area of northern Minnesota. If you're an adept stalker, you can find him on one of the many lakes and rivers or lost deep inside the Great North Woods. This is his first published work.



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

The Darkness

Ian Sputnik

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

The Darkness

by Ian Sputnik

THERE'S A CORNER IN MY GARDEN, a corner where evil dwells. No matter what time of day, or how bright the sun, It is as black as night. To look into its abyss sends shivers down my spine.

Whether tending to the lawn or just standing on the grass, I can feel its icy tentacles reaching out for me. Cold, intruding slithers enveloping my mind and probing my soul. A blackness that seems to exude a retched funk of death, of emptiness, of nothingness. It is pure loathing. Pure timeless hatred.

And although it lays in slumber now, I glance at my watch and realise that it will only be a matter of hours before it encroaches further into the garden and my life. Silently advancing towards the house in its endless pursuit to possess me. All that I am, and have ever been.

In one time or another it's always been there. When I was very young it resided beneath my bed. When older it hid in my cupboard. And when older still it would lay in stasis in any nook or cranny where it could hide from the light.

The light, whether natural or man-made, my only ally against its tireless pursuit. A pursuit borne of pure hatred and malice. Hatred and malice aimed me. Why me? What makes me different from the rest? Or maybe that's just it. Maybe it picks a target that will not stand out. A victim with no traits, gifts or presence that will differentiate him/her from the crowd. Who won't be especially missed. Someone it can stalk over years or decades. It is in no rush. It is eternal and I am mortal. Time is my enemy and its friend.

I steal myself away from my thoughts and return to the house. The night is setting in and already the blackness is silently emerging from its hiding place. Seeping out of the shadows like an oil slick of black blood.

I shut the door behind me and lock it. Why I think this will hinder its progress I'll never know. Doors, windows and locks. They mean nothing to it. Not to this formless malevolent entity.

I light a cigarette and crouch in the corner of the kitchen waiting for a kettle to boil to make myself a sickly sweet cup of strong tea. Anything to help me stay awake, to stay safe, away from its grasp.

I stir with a fright. I've fallen asleep. The cigarette in my fingers has burnt down to the butt. A little pile of ash lies on the floor below my hand. Then the

panic sets in. Night has fallen as I dozed. The lights in my house are off and the only glow is emanating from a distant security light in a neighbours garden. A light which will only shine for a short moment.

I hasten to the kitchen door. My plan simple but usually affective. Turn on the lights in the kitchen, living room, stairwell and bedroom. This gives me a safe passageway for all my night time needs. A safe route around the house in the hours of night. Immunity from its foul reach.

But this time it is different. The switch clicks, but nothing happens. No light, not even a flicker. Without thinking I pull open the living room door to try the switch in that room. How stupid. In an instant the deathly black is in my face. Its odour is in my nostrils. It's stickiness in my hair and oozing over my body. I hold my breath and jump back into the semi-darkness of the kitchen, slamming the door behind me.

I pace up and down, my mind and heart racing, refusing to calm down, incapable of rational thought. I need to think but fear is numbing my senses. Will a drink of something 'heavier' aid me in my mental stupor, or just hinder me. And what horrors will await me within the confines of the fridge once the door is opened. A fridge without light but filled with cold air. Pandora's box is best left closed.

How could this have happened? How could I be so careless? After all these years adhering to my strict regimen of turning the lights on before night, why have I now left myself so vulnerable?

Then, a moment of clarity. An idea within my brain shakes me into action.

I close the blinds in the face of the pitch black menace that peers through the kitchen window, staring at me, into me. Then I retrieve the old oil lamp that sits gathering dust on top of the cupboard. An ornament that although holds fuel, has rarely been used. A trinket bought for use with a, now, long over relationship, to create a warm atmosphere whilst relaxing at night in front of the television or listening to music.

I dismay at how little oil sits within the ornate glass receptacle. Was it always this empty? Did it evaporate? My mind continues to race, distracting me momentarily from my mission. Tiredness is misting my thoughts and my rational is working against me.

I reach for my lighter and attempt to flick it into action. Again and again it sparks with no flame. Then it flashes into life and I ignite the lamp. I adjust the wicks length until the flame slowly begins to illuminate the room. I swear I hear the evil thing groan as it is forced to reluctantly retreat back to its brethren, to its fellow shadows, back under the kitchen door, behind the blinds and into the bathroom. But my thoughts are so clouded I find it hard to differentiate between reality and fantasy. But I breathe a momentarily sigh of relief nonetheless.

I huddle back onto the floor holding the lamp inches in front of me. Bathing in its light and meagre warmth.

Should I check the fuse box? Can I restore the lights and end this night of terror. Will the tiny light from my lamp be enough to protect me from its reach within the cold, subterranean chamber of my cellar? Or is that its devious plan. To lure me into that underground room.

I can still see the murky blackness under the kitchen door, waiting patiently. I pile towels around its base. Blocking the sight of it, sealing myself in against its evil glare.

Then I sit and wait. I can feel sleepiness taking over again and fight in vain against its comforting embrace.

I wake again with no notion of how long I've slept. The lamp's glow has diminished greatly. The oil reservoir is empty. The only fuel held is within the wick. I know I'm running out of time and the refuge of morning's sunlight is far away. Too far.

I resolve that it won't have me. The blackness will have to find another victim.

My calmness surprises me, even as I pull the carving knife from the draw. I slump back to the floor and take one last look around the room by the dwindling light of the dying lamp. I take my first slash at my wrist. Flashes of light fill my vision as the pain electrifies my brain receptors springing it back to life. I switch the blade to my other hand. It's difficult to hold as the tendons have been damaged by my first onslaught, my grip clumsy and weak. I slash at the other wrist. Light fills my vision again and warm fluid runs down my limbs.

As my arms slump to the floor I sit in the warm puddle of my own blood. Slowly it begins to spread around my body in crimson pool, sticky and metallic smelling.

Then the panic starts again. The white beacons in my eyes begin to retract and the blackness begins to encroach from the peripherals of my vision.

Slowly the light shrinks, headlights being slowly reduced to pin pricks. The warmth leaves my body and is replaced with deathly coldness.

I sob uselessly as my mouth and body refuse to obey to any command from my blood starved brain. The sobbing is solely in my head as my useless husk of an outward shell is now disconnected and unresponsive but still I hear it. The crying is now being replaced by screaming. Inward, blood curdling, hysterical screaming.

I've been a fool. The darkness was unable to touch me in the realm of reality, the land of the living. But with its manoeuvring and coercing of the mind, my psyche, it has pushed me to do its bidding. Or was it my bidding all along? The darkness outside is nothing compared to the darkness within.

As all light is slowly diminished from my sight, from my mind and soul, it is

replaced with a cold blackness, smothering me as I scream and scream for the rest of eternity. Eternity spent without light. My life ebbs away and I leave this world just as I entered it. A frightened, silly little boy. A boy who is just afraid of the dark.

The End.

Case #71633

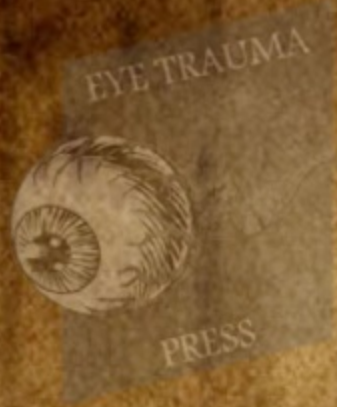
Ian Sputnik



I write for fun and to pass the time when it's late at night, the wife's gone to bed and there's nothing on TV (which is pretty much all the time these days).

The idea for the story has been rattling around my brain for years as it has a lot of elements of truth in it (albeit exaggerated for the benefit of the piece).

CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM



CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

Daniel's Scream

Patrick Winters

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

Daniel's Scream

by Patrick Winters

SOME SAY THAT AFTER DEATH, THE DEAD STAY QUIET -- that they move on. It's not always so. Sometimes, they linger.

They long to be heard. They need to be heard. Most will only ever whisper. Others speak clearly. Some scream. I can attest to that. My name is James Whitfield, and I have heard the dead.

Daniel Wilson was the kind of kid that never deserved the terrible things that happened to him.

He was quiet, intelligent, respectful -- all the qualities that make one a target to ignorant and brutish bullies in high school. At the age of 16, Daniel was dreadfully lanky, pathetically short, and terribly soft-spoken. He had a penchant of looking down at the ground, staring blankly through eyeglasses with thick lenses and round-shaped frames, rarely making eye contact with the few that spoke to him. When he walked, he moved swiftly, weaseling his way through heavy crowds of people like flowing water over rocks in a creek. His hair was always combed neatly, kept very short and very proper. His clothes were never colorful or at all expressive in any way, as he typically wore khaki pants and beige or white t-shirts or dress shirts.

If there had ever been a more successful student at Gregory's Bluff High School, no one could rightly confirm the notion. Daniel was a straight-A student. If he had ever even received a B-, I think the world would have stopped spinning on its axis. Whenever he wasn't in class watching the teacher's every movement like a hawk, Daniel had his nose buried in a book, collecting any and all information he could. For all we knew, he could have been a NASA super-computer on legs.

Devoted entirely to his studies -- and appearing to be physically incapable of speaking to anyone with an ounce of confidence -- Daniel kept to himself, off the radars of the majority of the student body. I was a part of that small minority

that did take heed of Daniel's existence. Having known him since elementary school and being neighbors since junior high, I was well aware of his existence -- however, even I paid little attention to him. The only times we ever spoke were when we passed each other by in the school halls or in the cafeteria -- and these transactions lasted only a handful of seconds, just enough time to say "hello" before quickly walking away.

In retrospect, I wish I'd have said more to him when I had the chance.

So there was Daniel in a nutshell: a brilliant, shy, humble young man that longed for nothing but quiet times to study and read peacefully. On the opposite end of the spectrum was Jason Woodruff, a towering, muscular, and boastful delinquent who loved nothing more than tormenting poor Daniel. At six feet four inches tall, and with a bulky body like a Hummer, Jason was always bad-mouthing someone or something, throwing in curse words and derogatory terms right and left simply for the sake of uttering them. If it wasn't football, alcohol, or nude women, Jason didn't take any interest in it.

However, there was one other area of interest that Jason took interest in: Daniel. And not for the right reasons.

Jason made sport out of ridiculing and tormenting Daniel. On any given day, one could see the lumbering bully push and shove Daniel into the lockers up to four, maybe even five times a day. No matter how quick Daniel was in maneuvering through the halls and a crowd, Jason was just slightly better at finding him and manhandling him across them. Along with this misguided show of force came other similar, brutish attempts at showing supremacy over the weak and timid Daniel. Foul and insulting names for Daniel were always in supply when it came to Jason, as the stream of hurtful nicknames and titles was gratuitous. I haven't the heart to repeat any of these terrible names.

Last but not least of the tortures Jason administered on Daniel were the occasional beatings.

No one can quite say how common the beatings were, but they were often enough, as far as I could tell. They were regular enough that split lips and bruises on his thin, pale cheeks became a typical feature of Daniel's appearance. More than once I had seen Daniel cowering in a corner of a classroom or the cafeteria, hiding his face from others, attempting to cover the bruises and cuts with an opened book or his tiny hands. Hiding his shame seemed almost pointless; no one was looking his way, regardless.

But beatings and hurtful words were set aside for something much worse one fateful day in October, a week before Halloween. It was in Mrs. Carmichael's Literature class when things took a turn for the worse.

It was an average day. Mrs. Carmichael was delivering her lesson with more passion than the class had in listening to it. She stood at the front of the class, her

graying hair done up in a bee-hive fashion, writing key-terms on the chalkboard. A fine layer of chalk-dust began to cover her unappealing brown dress.

Jason, ever the obnoxious ne'er-do-well, was fooling around and flirting with the girls, to no avail. Daniel was sitting in the back of the room, in the middle, eyes fixated on the textbook in front of him. I sat in the back-left corner, silent and out of the way -- the perfect vantage point to witness all that was to occur.

Tired of having her lessons ignored and disregarded by the class, Mrs. Carmichael decided to make an example of someone. That someone just had to be Jason Woodruff.

Jason was called on to ask Mrs. Carmichael's question about who wrote "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Oblivious and flustered, Jason's face turned bright red, partly out of embarrassment and partly out of anger. He answered her question with a mumbled "Stephen King."

The whole class erupted in laughter while Mrs. Carmichael simply shook her head in disapproval and disappointment. For a brief moment, the tables had been turned on the school bully, and I remember taking in the laughter of my classmates with an odd mixture of emotion -- partly pleasure, partly baited anxiety. All the while, Jason clenched his fists, glaring down at his desktop with a slanted, angered glance, saying nothing.

Courageously, Daniel raised his hand from the back of the room, breaking that bubble of protection and solitude he always kept up so steadfastly. Mrs. Carmichael's face automatically switched from a look of stony chastisement to a beaming smile. After she called on him, Daniel looked up slowly, and sheepishly uttered "Washington Irving." Mrs. Carmichael praised Daniel, affirming his answer.

Looking up from his desk, Jason turned around, glaring back at Daniel. The moment their eyes met, Daniel quickly looked downwards, slumping down in his seat, crossing his arms, and falling back into silence. Jason kept glaring at Daniel with that cold, steely stare for several more minutes before turning back around and doing something he'd never done before -- he went the rest of the class period without speaking. Mrs. Carmichael went on with her lesson.

I sat there, trying to ignore what I had just seen in the gaze of Jason -- an unspoken declaration of war.

And with war come the casualties.

As I said before, Daniel and I lived next to each other. Our homes were in a small cul-de-sac called Silent Meadows, positioned at the edge of town, just on the brink of the countryside. Surrounding the cul-de-sac was a forest full

of oak trees, where children went to play and teenagers went to partake in sexual rendezvous among the large collection of trees. This forest cut our little neighborhood off from the rest of town, making the cul-de-sac a quiet, isolated place.

The school was only a mile away, and as such, the teenagers that lived in Silent Meadows had a tendency to walk to school. Daniel and myself were no exception. And in order to get to school, the quickest way to get there was to traverse straight through the forest, and to go the same way to get back home.

So every day, Monday through Friday, I walked through that forest, often at a hurried rush in order to get to school on time. And everyday -- walking behind me and only a few comfortable paces back -- was Daniel. We always seemed to leave our houses at the same time, and Daniel, always the outcast, stayed out of sight and far enough away to prevent any conversation. And I -- always a tad too ignorant to try and bring about such conversation -- strolled along, rarely looking back, and never saying a word save for the occasional, brief "Hello." This process was repeated everyday when returning home, only reversed in destination.

The pattern we had in getting to school was followed on the day of Jason Woodruff's embarrassment in Mrs. Carmichael's class. The pattern of going back home, however, was not.

I remember rushing out of the front entrance of the school mere moments after the final bell rang, hurrying out with the speed of a bullet shot out of a gun. I was ready and eager to get myself home and unwind from the stresses and irritations of a high school Wednesday. In my rush, I only barely noticed that Daniel was nowhere in sight as I reached the edge of the woods. I brushed this thought away as quickly as it had entered my mind, like the swift wave of a hand swatting away a fly too close to one's face. Without a second thought, I entered the forest, the idea of coming home to a comfortable couch and a welcoming television enticing my teenage mind.

My walk through the woods was a silent one, as I walked through it alone.

The occasional, cool winter breeze wafted through the limbs of the oak trees that surrounded me on every side, causing a faint rustling noise from on high as the bare branches rubbed and scratched together. Like bare bone scraping against bare bone. Their leaves, long since fallen, lay scattered at my feet, brittle and dead. Each step I took found one or two of these leaves, and every time my foot came down, a harsh crunch seemed to echo with force through the stillness of the woods.

As day slowly began to give way to the oncoming night, the occasional soft breeze transitioned to more frequent bursts of chilling, biting gusts. My pace quickened with each of these gusts, and soon enough, I found myself at the

backdoor of my house. Quickly, I pulled out my house key, unlocked the backdoor, jolted inside, and slammed the door shut behind me.

I did not look to see if Daniel was anywhere in sight.

Later that night, after gorging myself on my mother's homemade dinner -- a heaping helping of mashed potatoes, peas, freshly-baked rolls, and mouth-watering fried chicken -- and after my father and I discussed in exuberance the Pittsburgh Steelers' defeat of the Baltimore Ravens the night before last, I settled into my room for the night, content as could be and no complaints in mind.

I was relaxed, I was full from a warm meal, and the growing darkness outside my bedroom window signified something to me -- it was time to write.

I had always held aspirations of becoming a writer, and cold, dark nights such as that were the times when I felt my creative juices flowed at their greatest rate. Something about the night soothed and relaxed me and put me in the apt mindset for crafting my "works," as I referred to them, trying to make my young, ignorant self seem already accomplished in writing. These works focused mostly on action and adventure -- dragons and knights, spies and gadgets, that sort of stuff. I wrote fun, enjoyable stories whose purpose was nothing more than creating uproarious explosions and grand fights.

I had never fathomed the idea of writing such a tale as I am trying to spin for you, now.

Anyways, as I said, I sat myself at my computer-desk, switched on the small lamp sitting at the corner of my desk, pulled up my trusty Microsoft Word Processor, and began typing away at my keyboard, my mind set on crafting the next big bestseller. Ideas flowed out from my mind, down to my scurrying fingers, and up onto the computer screen before me. The sound of the night was a symphony of clattering keyboard keys, whooshing wind against the window, and the faint voices of my parents sitting in the living room and conversing. It was the perfect soundtrack to my writing time.

The only time I broke my concentration from my fervent typing was to occasionally look out the window across the room from my writing desk. Sitting dead center in the wall, my 5'x 4' window was currently a portal of darkness. The sun had finally set, and with the shades pulled back, sheer black of night was the scene that lay outside my window.

Staring at the black void served as a screen to my inner thoughts, a blank canvas in which I saw the scenes of my stories depicted in clarity. It helped me to better picture and craft each idea that found a home in my head, and in turn, a place in my stories.

So that was how my night went. It became a pattern: type, swivel chair, look out the window, swivel chair back, type, repeat. How long I held close to this pattern, I'm not quite sure, as I didn't keep track of the time -- after all, I was on a roll. All I know is that the night continued to stretch on as I wrote my tale of adventure...

...and brandishing his sword, the knight stood defiant before the cave of the dragon. The horrid stench of sulfur and burnt flesh from the beast's victims reached the brave warrior's nose. The sight of discarded bones laying in piles at the cave's entrance did not shake the knight's determination in felling the dread creature within. He inched closer to the yawning mouth of the cavern, sword and shield held in steady grasp, ready for glorious battle. Then, from deep within the cave...

A shrill sound broke the night. A spine-tingling, bone-chilling screech of a sound. I jumped in my seat, hairs standing on end as the noise ringed in my ears. A brief exclamation passed my lips as I jolted straight up in my seat, my fingers no longer flying over the keyboard. I immediately swiveled my chair to face the window, realizing in an instant that whatever the sound was, it was coming from somewhere outside. It was not the wind. I knew that much, as the wind had died down as the night crawled by. Even if the wind had been blowing, it surely couldn't make a noise like that.

It was filled with such a raw intensity and force that I couldn't recognize it for what it was. At least, not at first, that is. My breath stuck in my chest as the sound began to die off, trickling to silence, its volume screeching to a halt.

Wide-eyed, I stared at my window.

Pure darkness stared straight back. It was not until the sound had ceased that I could finally place what it was and where it came from: a scream. From somewhere out in the woods behind the house. A human scream.

What followed the end of that dreadful scream was pure, absolute silence. No clacking of keyboard keys. No rushing wind through the night. No murmurs from in the house. I couldn't even hear my own breath, as there was none to hear -- I was transfixed, forced to hold it in for fear of what would happen if the unbelievable stillness were to be disturbed. Unblinking, I looked out into the night, knowing not what I might see. But all there was was the darkness. Darkness and silence. Damned darkness and silence.

Then the sound came again. This time, it was more audible, and far more pain-riddled. I clenched my hands around the arms of my chair, my palms aching as I clutched and gripped desperately at the arms, as if that act would defend me in some manner. My spine tingled as a chill crept straight up to the nape of my neck. My ears perked at the profound terror and the horrid agony that was held in that god-awful scream. That terrible howl stretched on for what seemed

like forever. It echoed in my mind, filling me with fear and amazement at its sheer intensity. I could even feel tears welling at the edges of my eyes, it was so upsetting, so forceful, so raw.

Like its predecessor, the scream trailed off and slowed to a stop. Silence once again reigned. My eyes continued to stare fixedly out my bedroom window. The scene beyond the glass window-pane never altered -- all was black outside. Like a figure carved of stone, I sat there, unmoving, unflinching, in awe at what my ears had just heard. Seconds crawled by like the slow movement of a caterpillar, inching there way by with a measured sluggishness. I waited with baited breath for yet another horrid scream. But it never came.

Eventually, the wind began to stir outside, blowing against my window. I heard my parents out in the living room, my father clearly saying "What the hell was that?"

As soon as I had some degree of composure, I stood up from my chair, my knees wobbling as I rose. My stomach had a strange, empty feeling. I fluttered my eyes rapidly, trying to break out of the daze I had been forced into. I took one last look out my window, scanning the darkness that almost seemed to mock me, finding nothing. Then I rushed out of my bedroom and into the living room, at a loss as to what to say to my parents concerning the bizarre occurrence I had just partaken in.

After hearing the screams, my parents called the police in order to report the incident. My mother was flustered, shaking and speaking quickly, and my father tried to hide the fact that he was flustered, as well. I was clearly not the only one affected by those awful screams.

Phoning the police, my mother told them about the awful sounds from the woods. My mother listened to the person on the other end of the line attentively, the hand holding the phone to her ear shaking a little. After a minute, my mother hung up and turned to my father and me. Taking a deep breath and trying to calm herself, she told us what the officer at the police station said. There were already a few other people from around the neighborhood that called in to report hearing the screams. On a possible related note, Daniel Wilson's parents had called the police to report that Daniel hadn't come home from school and that they'd heard no word from him. My mother said the police officer she spoke to told us to keep a look out for any signs of Daniel.

By afternoon the following day, Daniel Wilson's body was found in the woods. A missing person's report was finally filed after sixteen hours. As Daniel was not an adult, the report could be made sooner than the typical twenty-four hour

period -- nevertheless, it ultimately did no good. After the sixteenth hour, and with no word from anyone in town about Daniel's current whereabouts, a search party consisting of several police officers and adults from the cul-de-sac of Silent Meadows -- including my father -- went out into the woods to look for any sign of Daniel, scattering and hoping to cover a great deal of ground.

After two hours of scouring the woods, Daniel was found. It was somewhere near the heart of the woods, a short ways off from the path Daniel and I walked through each weekday to get to and from school. According to what my father said when he came home, a police officer literally stumbled across young Daniel, wading through a pile of dead leaves and tripping over something. That something was poor Daniel. Soon after, the whole search party was reunited and standing around the body of Daniel Wilson, silent, shocked, and somewhat dumbfounded.

My father told about his experience standing with a small cluster of his friends, only a few feet from where the body lay. Having listened in on what the police taping off the area said, my father was able to glean some information concerning what had just become a murder case. It seemed that after school released the previous day, Mr. Cranston, a chemistry teacher, asked Daniel and a few other students to stay behind in order to help him with organizing the chemistry lab. Daniel graciously agreed to help, staying with two other students until five o'clock to help before heading home. Mr. Cranston called the police to inform them about this as soon as he received word of Daniel's disappearance earlier that morning, shortly after the search began. The other two students' families called the police as well, corroborating Mr. Cranston's story, and saying that both students saw Daniel heading in the direction of the woods before they walked home in the opposite direction.

My father also told of how the police mentioned how badly Daniel's face was bruised, with black and blue splotches covering his face. The police had murmured that they believed Daniel was beaten to death. Later that day, it was confirmed that Daniel had indeed been brutally pummeled to his dying breath. A coroner that analyzed the body found that several of Daniel's ribs were broken, a few teeth were missing, and almost every inch of the body was covered in sickening bruises. He determined that the teenager had been hit numerous times with a strong clubbing weapon, possibly a heavy branch, or even a steel pipe. He couldn't tell which weapon was used -- all he knew was that it was clearly no accident. Daniel was murdered, and his body was purposefully hidden within the pile of leaves.

According to the police, there was no suspect in mind, yet.

After my father told my mother and me about this last little detail, I waltzed slowly to my room. I couldn't take hearing much more, especially with the

sickening thought that began breeding in my head. No suspect. Those two words kept going through my mind as I sluggishly walked to the solitude of my room.

Within the short time it took to walk from the living room to my bedroom, a wave of thought and memory washed over my mind. I remembered how Daniel walked through school so sheepishly, so lonely, so undeserving of his tribulations. I remembered how his eyes gazed at the floor blankly, no emotion on his face save for a forlorn, blank stare. I remembered that class of Mrs. Carmichaels' -- the one that seemed like ages ago, yet was only the day before. And with this memory came another: the sight of a cold, glaring stare of Jason Woodruff. That stare of utter hatred and unwarranted indignation. And it was this memory that forced those two words to keep flowing through my mind.

No suspect. No suspect. No suspect...

Finally, I remembered those few times -- those all too-few times -- when I felt pity for Daniel, yet never said a thing to him in comfort or friendship. Even now, I remained silent. Despite how I was beginning to despise silence, I still clung to it out of some pathetic sense of being powerless to do anything.

When I reached my room and began to shut the door behind me, I could still hear my father and mother talking. My mother was saying how horrible the whole situation was and how no person deserved such a fate. My father agreed, and before my door closed and cut off their silent voices, he mentioned seeing Daniel's face after the search party brushed the leaves away from his corpse.

He remarked on how Daniel's face was twisted in obvious agony, wide-eyed in terror, and how his mouth was agape in a silent, ghastly scream.

A week and its events passed by surprisingly quickly. The search for Daniel's killer went on, without much fruition. A few days after his body was discovered, Daniel's funeral took place. Although we did not attend the funeral, my parents and I went to the visitation out of respect to both Daniel and his parents. We were neighbors, after all, and it seemed like the right thing to do. I signed the book set out for those who attended the visitation. I said my brief apologies and condolences to Daniel's parents. But I did not -- could not -- go up to Daniel's casket. I shied away from it as much as possible, refusing to even look directly at it. I had it in my head that if I looked at the open casket, Daniel's dead, screaming face would stare back at me, and I would hear those dreadful screams once again.

I knew very little about what and who was involved in the investigation of Daniel's murder. No other breaking news or revelations came to light. However,

one interesting fact came to my attention through conversation with one of my school friends. Apparently, someone had held a similar idea as I did, as the police had, indeed, questioned Jason Woodruff in his whereabouts that fateful Wednesday night. Nothing came of it, however. Jason had stated he was at a party with friends at the time of Daniel's death. He named names, and each one corroborated his story. Nevertheless, I found little faith in the validity of Jason's story. I had known him long enough and saw him do countless dirty-handed deeds to realize that alibis and lies were in constant supply to the lumbering bully.

Life at school saw little change. For a place full of people that rarely paid attention to Daniel when he was there, it was no real surprise to see their lack of empathy and concern in his absolute absence. The only concern anyone ever worked up about the situation was the occasional mentioning of Daniel being the first of a serial killer's killing spree. The teacher's did their best to quell any such talk amongst the student body, and even tried to prevent any talk about Daniel, period. The latter was, sadly, an easy enough job.

The school did not change. I, however, did.

I spoke little, even when I was among my friends. I developed a tendency to simply stare up at my teacher in whichever class I was, looking, but not really listening. The only time I did listen very intently was in the two classes I had with Jason Woodruff, and I did not listen to the teacher. I instead listened to Jason. I listened, but never looked, as I didn't have the gumption to look him in the eye. His typical boasting and ignorant remarks continued as they always did. He fooled around in class, whispered insults and curses, and what's more, he seemed utterly at peace and resigned to do so. There was no sign of gnawing regret, no hint of remorse for any misdeed. Some might see this as simply an ignorant young man's selfish ways. I saw it as a sure sign of his hateful audacity in his brutish tendencies.

I was convinced he was guilty. Still, I said and did nothing.

In light of what happened, the school decided it was best that its students living in Silent Meadows were to be either dropped off by parents, drive themselves, or be picked up and dropped off by school-bus. Walking through the woods was seen as a bad idea and even a possible risk. So, every morning, I got onto a school-bus to go to school, and hopped onto another to go home. Most of the kids saw it as an inconvenience. I saw it as a blessing. Our route to school took us around the woods and through the very edge of them, far from the most dense area of the trees. Every time I went to school and each time I went home in that school-bus, I stared out the window, gazing at the trees.

Thinking of walking through those woods made sweat bead up on my brow and my stomach turn with fear. Every time I thought about those woods, I heard

those dying screams of Daniel's in my head. I pictured running through the trees, the screams growing nearer and nearer as I desperately tried to get away from them. The idea terrified me. If I were to never go into those woods again, it would be too soon.

I found some sense of solace in my writing. My practice of writing at night and in the dark, save for the small lamp being on, continued. I drew the shades to where they were almost closed, save for an open gap that was no wider than an inch. I could write in the near-dark, but the thought of staring out that large window and seeing only darkness wasn't something I relished.

It had been two weeks since Daniel's untimely end when I finally continued where I had left off in my story.

Night had fallen, dinner was digesting in my stomach, and I sought to write -- more so to calm my nerves and relax me than for the desire of writing my hopeful bestseller. Situating myself comfortably in my chair and being mindful to look towards the window as little as possible, I continued writing my story...

Then, from deep within the cave, an ominous rumble echoed outwards, reverberating against the rocky walls. The knight felt the ground at his feet begin to shake. Peering into the wide mouth of the cave, the knight saw a faint red pinpoint of light forming in the darkness within. Heat poured out of the cave, filling the air. The pinpoint became a ball, the ball became the size of a shield, and within seconds, it seemed as if Hell itself were coming to battle the knight as flames spewed out of the cavern. The knight held up his shield to defend himself from the licking fire. He cautiously peered over the top of his shield. And lumbering forth from the darkness and the fire was the dragon.

It was gigantic in size, with blood-red scales covering its body and yellowish-orange covering its underbelly. Boney spines jutted out of its skull, nostrils flared as smoke came out of them, and teeth like knives were brandished in a snarling mouth. With eyes of shining amber, the beast glared at the knight in disgust, angered at the sight of the intruder, but overjoyed to have another meal. Rearing its scaly head and taking a vile breath into its monstrous lungs, the beast launched forward with a thunderous roar...

And then it happened. Like last time, without any warning, a screeching scream pierced the night. I exhaled in a rush of shock. My hands clenched involuntarily and tightly, hovering above my keyboard. My body began to shake, and I slowly turned in my chair toward the window. I felt compelled to do so, though I'm not sure why -- the thought of what may be beyond the window frightened me incredibly. Nevertheless, I looked.

The horrible howl ended by the time I was fully situated in front of my window. The small gap in the shades showed a straight, black line going down the center of my window. It seemed to me like that darkness was

seeping through that small gap, trying desperately to reach me, threatening to burst through the window. Yet, through my fear and my thoughts of the darkness, another inkling of a thought shone through. A thought that soon took precedence in my mind: that scream sounded familiar. Familiar, yet impossible. It was almost exactly like the first scream I'd heard a week before -- the desperate outcry of a dying Daniel Wilson. I say "almost" because it was strung out at the same rate and as high-pitched as the other night, and contained just as much agony and defeat. But there was something off about it. It sounded hollow, in some strange way. Like it was not uttered past human lips, but an echo or recording of itself. It had what I can only describe as an inhuman quality to it.

Something inside me told me to brace myself for another scream, one like that final, tormented shriek that chilled my blood and made my entire body become rigid as a rock only a week prior. That something must have been in-tune with the ways of the night, as mere seconds later, a second scream ringed out from somewhere in the woods. And just like last time, the second one was even more agonizing to listen to than the first. Once again, this dreadful, piercing cry seemed hollow, otherworldly, and inhuman. A lump formed in my throat as I held back a cry of fear. My chest heaved as I struggled to breathe. My eyes blinked in an uncontrollable flurry and they began to water, tears threatening to burst out like a faulty dam.

As the scream drug on, I raised my hands up to my ears, cupping them and shielding them. I leaned forward in my chair, almost in a fetal position, trying to bury my face in my knees. Even with my ears covered, that damned scream still reached them with the same ferocity and strength as it would without my futile attempt at ignoring it. I began rocking back and forth, pathetically incapable of controlling my actions at this point. Madness was something I'd only known of in movies and stories, back then. Looking back on it all, I believe I was on the verge of slipping into it, falling into it, maybe even thrown into it.

Thankfully, before madness could be reached, the scream trailed off. But no respite came. Unlike the other night, a third scream immediately cut through the night.

Even though my hands still covered my ears, muffling this last scream, I realized it was different from the previous two. It shared the same degree of pain and fright as the last two, but aside from this pure, despicable display of emotion, there were no other similarities. The pitch was different. It was a deeper, far less shrill outcry. Most notably, this scream had the human quality to it that the others had not -- an all-too human quality.

This shriek did not come from the same source as the other two. There was no doubt about it.

I kept my head down and my ears covered as I waited for the scream to end.

Within seconds after its beginning, it ended, cutting off with a definite finality, not slowly fading away. I did not move from my chair after its conclusion. Unlike last time, I stayed put, firmly situated in my seat, not needing to run off and ask my parents if they'd heard what I had. I imagined all of Silent Meadows would have heard those horrid cries of suffering. So I sat there, waiting for my parents to come to me and ask if I'd heard those screams.

Oh, yes. I heard them. By God, I heard them.

Within a half-hour after the screams came, the police were out scouring the woods. Numerous households in Silent Meadows had called the police, and after what had already happened and what had already been found in those woods, the police were not inclined to wait as they had before. This time, they came armed, shotguns in hand and attack-dogs on leashes. Within another half-hour, the police had found another body in the woods.

This time, it was the body of Jason Woodruff.

As the week passed by, details about what occurred became known to the public at large, primarily through gossip, a little from the police. And this gossip and news was quite peculiar. The word about town was that Jason was found quite close to where Daniel Wilson's body was found. No one knew what he was doing out there or had any idea as to what reason he would have for being there. None of his fellow slacker friends had heard from him or seen him that day, or so they claimed. His family hadn't spoken to him since he left for school.

Rumors continued to spread that it was, indeed, a serial killer behind the latest murder. But several discrepancies between the murder of Daniel and Jason's death contradicted this idea of a serial killer. First of all, Daniel's body had been hidden -- Jason's was left out in the open, with no apparent attempt at concealing it. Also, Daniel was clearly beaten to death. Determining Jason's cause of death was much more difficult. The coroner found no distinguishable bruises, marks, or lacerations on Jason's bulky, muscular body -- none whatsoever. Death by physical interaction seemed highly unlikely.

After further inspection and dissection, no foreign substances were found in Jason. There were no drugs in his system, nor any alcohol. There were no signs of poison or any such thing-- not a hint of foul play at all. After a full inspection of Jason's heart, brain, and numerous other areas of the dead boy's body, the coroner was forced to announce Jason's cause of death as being undetermined. The coroner was completely at a loss as to what brought about the teenager's untimely end -- or, at least at a loss as to what he could legally put on a death certificate. Through word of mouth, however, and as gossip spread quicker than

the plague, most people throughout town heard the coroner's opinion on the situation. It was, and I quote, "as if the kid died of fright."

I was inclined to agree with this. Deep within me, I think I had a good idea as to what happened out there in those woods, though I never dared speak of it to a living soul. Even I had difficulty believing in it and wrapping my head around the notion, it seemed so impossible and unreasonable. And yet my soul told me it was the only possible explanation, despite the horror of it.

What did I believe happened out in those woods? In a word: retribution. Others I heard speaking about the night of Jason's death said the three screams came from Jason. I believe only the last was his. The other two were Daniel's. To be more exact, they were from Daniel's ghost.

As the coroner said, there were no marks on Jason's body, and it was as if he died from being scared to death. After hearing those inhuman shrieks -- screams that could not have come from living lips -- I knew of no other thing that could scare a person to death as those could. I believe with all my heart that Jason -- ignorant to what his violent and misguided ways had spawned and unafraid of punishment or incrimination in the murder he'd thought he committed flawlessly -- ventured out to those woods for whatever reason he so chose, never bothering to think of what waited for him amidst those dead oak trees. Perhaps he went out there to meet up with some punk friends, or perhaps he was simply passing through the woods to go do some dirty-handed deed, or -- more likely in my mind -- to gloat and revel in the place of his atrocity.

What he found there was none other than the vengeful remnants of someone he had wronged in the worst possible way. What he found was a scene of horror as he stared in disbelief at the ghost of Daniel Wilson, screaming his death-screams to taunt the brutish bully that had tormented him until his dying breath. What he found was his doom.

Part of me wishes to accept this explanation without a second thought. The idea of the meek and powerless Daniel getting payback for the wrongs done to him gave me some sense -- be it a sick and depraved one -- of justice. Then again, part of me dreaded believing this explanation.

The dead rising from the grave was by no means a pleasant one. It terrified me to think of encountering a vengeful spirit standing before me. And then there were those screams. Those screams that every now and then echoed through my mind. If Daniel could rise from the grave to exact revenge, what would prevent his spirit from coming to others who had wronged him, or perhaps ignored him, leaving him to his demise at the hands of brutes like Jason Woodruff? What if his screams would be heard by others just before they, too, were sent screaming into a dark afterlife? What would stop his ghost from coming after me? What would stop those screams from reaching my ears yet again, driving me into

either madness or into a grave? The thought has kept me up on countless nights since the night of Jason's death.

Whether or not I would ever hear those horrendous screams again is yet to be seen. All I could do was continue on with my life and hope and pray the shrieks of the dead would never again greet my ears and my mind once more.

The woods behind my house were a place I refused to venture to ever again. I've tried my very best to avoid going anywhere near them, no matter the circumstance. It's been well worth it, as I struggle to avoid coming across the horrible things I only dare to imagine seeing amidst those oak trees.

I have continued my writing, but in a different fashion than I had once practiced. Rather than simply turning on the single, small lamp on my desk, I turn my overhead lights on, illuminating my entire room. I keep the shades of my bedroom window closed. I do this constantly. My blank slate for imagining and picturing my stories became the wall in front of me.

Darkness is no longer a canvas on which I see my grand ideas for my tales. It's now a menagerie depicting a horrific image that I could never shake -- the face of a young man I once knew, his face pale as death, and his mouth agape in a gut-wrenching scream.

Silence is no longer a welcomed idea to me. It does not calm me or put me in a state of peace. Instead, it has served only as a prelude to the enacting of my deepest fear -- that whenever silence fell upon my world, those ghastly screams would once again echo through not only the night, but my very soul.

Some say that after death, the dead stay quiet -- that they move on. It's not always so. Sometimes, they linger.

They long to be heard. They need to be heard. Most will only ever whisper. Others speak clearly. Some scream. And when the dead scream, the living will scream, as well.

The End.

Case #87163

Patrick Winters

I am currently a 21 year old junior attending Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. I intend to major in both English Literature and Creative Writing, and am a member of Sigma Tau Delta, an international collegiate English honor society. Writing is my passion in life, and I hope to make a living as an author. Horror is my preferred genre of story. If it goes bump in the night, I'll read it or write it. My short story "Caress" is now available for the NOOK on Barnes and Noble's website, and my horror novelette "Murmur" will soon join it. My influences include Stephen King, Clive Barker, Bentley Little, and Robert E. Howard, among others.



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Dark Verse

Physician: Dr. Salam
7128-DV758JJ

Luke Tarzian
Comateta M. Clifton
Reg Rhodes

A large, abstract red ink smudge or signature is located in the lower-left quadrant of the page. It consists of several overlapping, scribbled lines of red ink, some of which are quite thick and dark, while others are lighter and more faded. The overall shape is roughly triangular, pointing towards the bottom right.

The Things Beneath the Stairs

by Luke Tarzian

We are angels thrown from Heaven,
Cast below,
Condemned to rot.
Abandoned by the Lambent,
We sleep where Death resides.

We crawl beneath the eldritch sky,
Howling, shrieking
Through the night;
A choir of the damned,
We sing a sinner's lullaby.

We wallow in the Styx
Doused in oil,
Drowned in flame—
Hollow, soulless corpses
Bound to Stygian wastes.

We haunt the dying halls
Cloaked in shadows,
Drowned in shame—
Woebegone cadavers,
Nameless, bound to Stygian wastes.

We are the things beneath the stairs,
The tortured
And the violent;
Bound to Stygian wastes,
Where the sun is always silent.

Case #80817

Luke Tarzian

Luke was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1990. He has a B.A. in English from CSU Fullerton and loves to sip whiskey. His favorite writers are Edgar Allan Poe, Neil Gaiman, and Brandon Sanderson. He is currently working on Sewn From Seeds, a dark fantasy trilogy for young adults. His work has appeared in Sanitarium Magazine, Bloodbond, and The Literary Hatchet.

Luketarzian.wordpress.com

[Facebook.com/SewnFromSeedsOfficial](https://www.facebook.com/SewnFromSeedsOfficial)

[Twitter.com/luke_tarzian](https://twitter.com/luke_tarzian)



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The Sentinel

by Comateta M. Clifton

As if an apparition,
he will materialize
at dawn with the blue light
heralding sunrise.
He has aged, his hair graying,
his gait growing slow.
Still he ventures to the place
he is always known to go—
one of the black wrought-iron benches
overlooking the lake.
For forty years, it has been a trip
he has yet failed to make.
His watch has grown more diligent,
as old age creeps in.
For he remains haunted by
secrets long held within,
moved into action, fuel by
the guilt of his misdeed.
A pillar of the community,
he chooses to mislead,
to keep skeletons closeted,
lest his true colors are shown;
lest his secret surfaces
and the truth becomes known—
that the Lady in the Lake,
he dumped there, lifeless, decades ago,
angered by her rejection,
her incessant cries of no
when she rebuked his advances
and dealt his ego a blow.

Case #76071

Comateta M. Clifton

She can find her near the waning candlelight and where ghost roam. Born where vampires are rumored to exist, she lived among the bayous where mosquitoes can be saddled. Spanish moss droops from Oak and Bald Cypress Trees. Comateta M. Clifton enjoyed reading and writing mystery, crime, horror, and speculative fiction. She enjoyed reading and writing traditional rhyming, traditional dark rhyming, dark free verse, and free verse. She appeared on the following short stories and anthology included Bits of the Dead, Taj Mahal Review, Twisted Cat Tales, and Astounding Tales. On poetry, she appeared on Contemporary Rhyme, Decompositions, and Sanitarium Magazine. Comateta M. Clifton has a portfolio online at <http://www.Writing.Com/authors/fictiondiva>.

CLAYTON HILL SANITARIUM

The Worlds First Female Vampire

by Reg Rhodes

This story is not to be read by the weak minded, or feeble hearted.
This is how the story of the worlds first female vampire was started.

In the mysterious land known as Transylvania; there was an evil; resolute and pure.

A noble bloodline tainted by endogamy; a royal infection with no cure.

An infant was born onto this earth.

A product of incest; the seeds of cruelty sown at birth.

Delivered into the world and cared for by a murderous nurse.

The new babies existence would later become known as a curse.

Witness to a torturous execution when she was only seven;
she had already been taught to reject God, and the concept of Heaven.

Her royal father had ordered a thieving gypsy to be forced, and sewn into the stomach of a live horse.

The gypsies head had been left exposed, as witness to his own slow death; there was no chance for recourse.

Her royal mother had schooled her with horribly cruel and sadistic teachings.

Peasants were considered subhuman, dispensable, and treated as inferior beings.

At eight years of age, she learned that commoners could be killed with impunity; there was no fear of retribution.

Shown unimaginable methods of torturous discipline; the murder of peasants and servants was a simple solution.

Forced to watch while her two sisters were beaten, raped and hung.

The insanity of the young Elizabeth Bathor had just begun.

When she was only 9 years of age;

She was already plagued by violent seizures, and intense fits of rage.

Her future as Countess had already been arranged and foreseen.
She was betrothed at eleven, forced to marry at fourteen.

Her aunt introduced her to the pleasures of incestual lesbianism.
While her uncle taught her the ways of the occult, witchcraft and satanism.

She enjoyed her seemingly endless inherited family riches;
employing the expertise of alchemists, satanists, warlocks and witches.

Her husband was a fierce warrior on the battlefield; waging war with the invading
Turks.

He would regularly bring home a foray of captured prisoners; providing Elizabeth
with sadistic perks.

He would educate her in torture; it all took place in the castles dungeon.
He taught his pupil how to tear the flesh from her enemies, and to mercilessly
beat and bludgeon.

Intertwined with her insanity.
She was smitten with narcissitic vanity,
and addicted to her sexual deviancy.

Her beauty was legendary and known throughout the land.
Her discovery of eternal youth would soon be at hand.

A servant girl brushing the Countesses lustrous hair had made a fatal mistake.
The young girls life; Elizabeth would violently take.

The girl had accidentally scraped Elizabeths scalp with the hairbrush.
The angry Countess whirled, and viciously chewed the girls face off. She was
rewarded with an orgasmic rush.

She remorselessly observed the girls blood running down her guilty hand.
That poor soul was one of 650 young women to later disappear from that strange
land.

The blood of that unfortunate servant girl saturated the Countesses pale skin.
In her search for eternal beauty; she had no hesitation committing the ultimate sin.
The worst in deranged atrocities; ever to be committed by a female, would

susequently begin.

Her victims blood; once washed away, revealed her newly radiant and youthful looking skin underneath.

Paranoid fears of facing her own mortality were replaced with relief.

Remorseless, she didn't care that the families of those missing daughters would be stricken with infinite grief.

She gleefully realized that she could keep her beauty forever.

The 'Blood Countess,' had discovered a fresh, torturous endeavor.

Much to her delight; her trusted alchemist had been right.

They inspected her freshly glowing skin; and were rewarded with a pleasant sight.

Her skin had become youthful and shiny looking; it appeared to be revitalized.

Obsessed with vanity and immortality; her dreams had been realized.

She kept her bathtub filled with the fresh blood of young virgin girls, and secretly soaked in it in one of the nearby caves.

Mutilated bodies; she hung upside down. Their throats were slashed, the corpses stashed in makeshift graves.

In the warmth of virginal blood; she would bask.

While sipping at it from her golden flask.

Keeping their terrible secret; the royal family protected their own when questioned over suspicions.

Nobility quickly took advantage of the peasants, and their silly superstitions.

Rumors and stories of blood drained corpses would quickly transpire.

If substantiated, the tall sounding tales could bring down the entire Bathory empire.

Alas, nobility embraced the concept that it was the work of a rogue vampire.

Her mortifying endeavor went on for more than twenty five years.

That evil castle could have been washed away by all of the tears.

This all is a terrible tale to tell.

Her black soul must be eternally burning in hell.

Many of her torturous acts; this writing cannot mention.
Much of what she did is beyond normal human comprehension.

She started her own academy; to help the girls finish their education, and to teach them social graces.
The Countess received immeasurable pleasure, simply by using her teeth to tear off some of their faces.

There was the young maiden who talked too much, and was punished by having her mouth sewn shut.
The Countess was ambitious; ceaselessly looking for unique, new ways to inflict pain, mutilate and cut.

In the summertime; many of the peasant girls were stripped naked, covered in honey, and tied to trees.
They were then left to die excruciatingly slow deaths; as victims to the biting bugs and stinging bees.
In the wintertime; pupils were chained up outside, and had water poured onto their exposed bodies. They were then left to freeze.

She used a hot poker to burn out her victims eyes;
All the while; fiendishly lavishing in their cries.

She employed an evil and sadistic club-wielding dwarf named Ficzeko.
He perfected ingenious ways of making their deaths unimaginably painful and slow.

There was the daring fair maiden; an escapee who almost got away.
She was the first to die in the 'Iron Maiden'; a hanging cage, lined with spikes.
Built in anticipation for that inevitable day.
The countess preferred to kneel below the cage and shout obscenities at her creator, rather than kneel and pray.

She also implemented a new method of torture she had learned; known as 'starkicking.'
Despite her victims flailing, the burning waxed paper between their toes remained sticking.
Her victims would see stars before blacking out from the pain, while still frantically kicking.

Girls who were accused of stealing received a red hot coin in their hand.
Marking their doomed palm with a permanent brand.

She administered what was known as frontal flagellation; the practice of using a barbed whip to administer her victims unmerciful lashings.
She loved to study their faces, as her victims realized their grim fate; staring into their terrified eyes as she amusedly observed their thrashings

One girl made the mistake of begging for something to eat.
So the countess rewarded her with a special treat.

She made sure that poor soul would never chew again, or utter another word.
So she yanked the girls jaw open until a loud popping sound was heard.

Another one of the servants; Elizabeth noticed was way too thin.
She decided she would fatten her up by forcing her to eat boiled strips of her own skin.

Of course, she couldn't do all that hectic work alone.
She had dozens of minions; to raid their choice of seventeen villages, kidnap girls, and make sure her cover wasn't blown.
Rest assured, they would later reap what they had sown.

As the years went by, she became more enamored with her power; so the 'Blood Countess' got careless.
In a lustful rage, she had thrown 4 corpses from the castles roof, and they had all landed on the terrace.
The villagers quickly made the grisly discovery, and reported the undeniable finding; finally taking down the heiress.

The 'Blood Countess' was immediately put on trial.
Convinced of her immortality; she continued to smile.

Among her cohorts; only her most loyal student in torture refused to testify.
The court carried out her immediate sentence by ripping off her breasts, and gouging out an eye.

Despite her cruel punishment; the servant girl knew her execution still loomed, so she still refused to break.
She and her collaborators all had their fingers snipped off with a hot pincers, they

were than burned at the stake.

As for the countess; she was royalty, thus she wouldn't meet the same fate.
To save her sinful, bloodthirsty soul; it was way too late. ,
She had already been seen lounging on Satans lap; sensually absorbing his evil
and hate.

When her sentence was handed down;
her smug smile turned into a frown

Much to her dismay; she found her royal status wouldn't protect her from a world
of depression and gloom.
She spent the rest of her days staring at her reflection in a windowless room.
After only 4 years, she would instigate her own doom.

The petty punishment she received for her multitude of killings was a complete
travesty.
During her remaining years, her vainful mirror only reflected a daily reminder of
her own ugly reality.

She had plenty of time to observe her own rapid aging; fearfully sensing the
consummation of her own perceived immortality.
Perhaps she wanted to go to Hell earlier than anticipated. So she starved herself to
death; becoming her own final casualty.

For 100 years, the court records remained sealed, and the Countesses name was
considered bad luck, and strictly forbidden to mention.
In 1817, eyewitness accounts of her crimes were published; finally ending nearly
200 years of aristocratic denial and suppression;

In the mysterious land known as Transylvania; a timeless tale was born in 1897.
The story is an ingenious, romanticized fable about a vampire named Dracula. A
lost soul rejected by heaven.

Perhaps the writer was secretly fascinated by the Countesses thirst for blood, and
her obsession with vampirism.
The author never mentioned Elizabeths name in his writings. Quite possibly; he,
too was afflicted with superstition.

The fictional story of a blood sucking, male nocturnal vampire; written by Bram

Stoker, has played on peoples irrational fears for over a century.

The true story of a blood bathing, sadistic murderess known as the 'Blood Countess,' has perpetually haunted societies memory.

Modern day Hollywood has yet to make a movie about the Countess. Maybe because of superstitions, or fear that moviegoers would be scarred mentally.

Although the story of the worlds first female vampire may have taken place over 400 years ago. It is forever etched on the conscience of humanity.

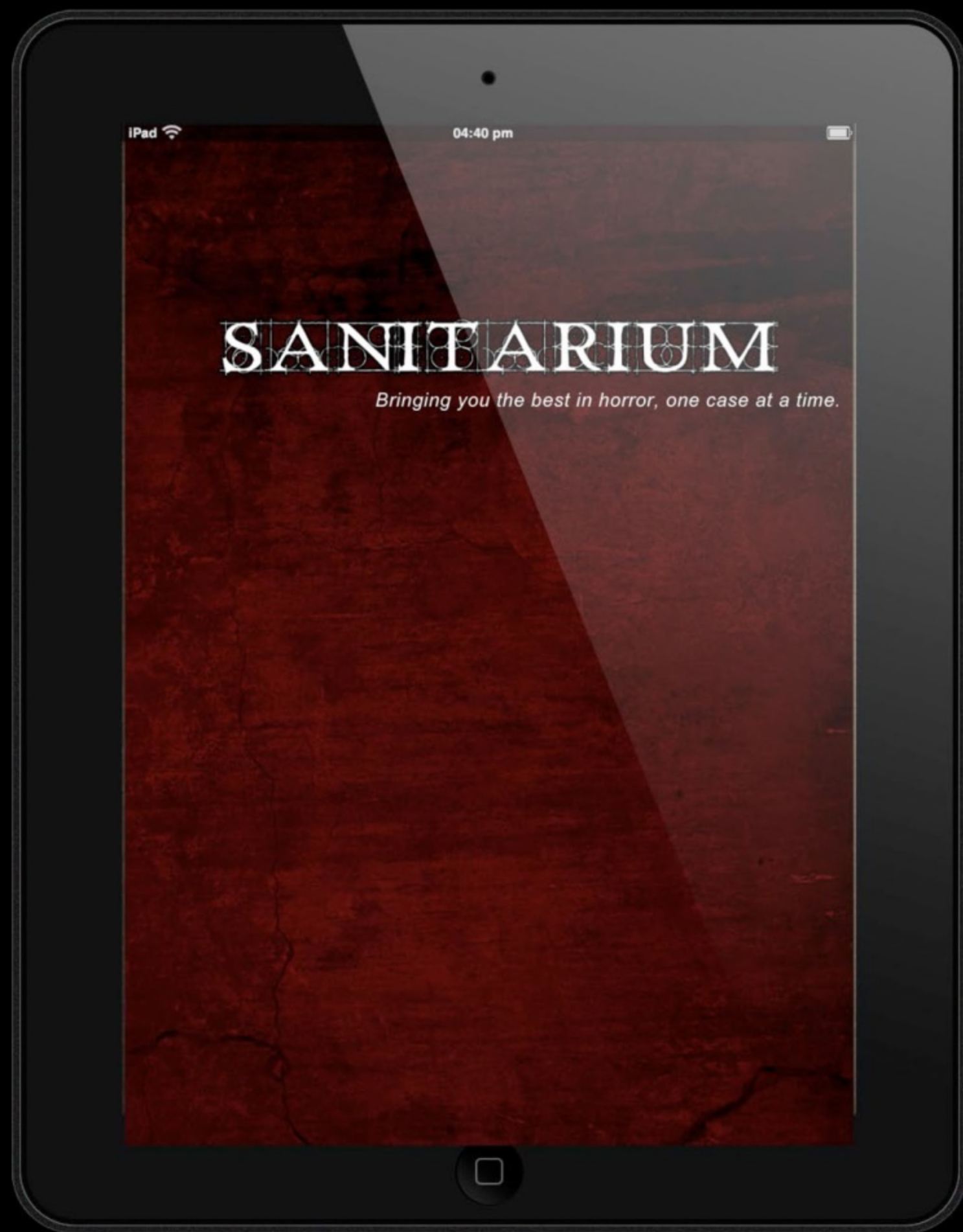
Case #33880

Reg Rhodes

Reg Rhodes is a writer of horror stories and dark verse poetry. He is also passionate about sharing his personal experiences related to addiction and recovery, through his writing. He is currently writing a book that will be comprised of poems and short stories about his life experiences in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Reg has traded in his career as a marine technician, to have more time to pursue his writing dreams and goals. He lives in a rural area in the high forests of Colorado with his two little dogs; Fraser and Wrangler.

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On the Record

A Moment With Richard Thomas

Your website, WhatDoesNotKillMe.com, describes your genre of writing as neo-noir transgressive slipstream fiction, or, as you put it, "dark and strange." Can you elaborate a bit on this genre and why you choose to write in it?

Well, I grew up reading a wide range of authors and genres, including Ray Bradbury and Robert Heinlein, but I latched onto Stephen King pretty early. I'm still a huge fan. In college I read the beats, including surrealists like William Burroughs. Later, when I saw *Fight Club*, I discovered Chuck Palahniuk, a transgressive author who got me to neo-noir voices like Dennis Lehane, Will Christopher Baer, Craig Clevenger, and Stephen Graham Jones. When I got my MFA, that literary influence seeped in, even though I was drawn to the dark voices and black sheep like Flannery O'Connor, Denis Johnson, Mary Gaitskill, Cormac McCarthy, and Haruki Murakami. All of this together allows me to write in a number of genres, traditional and contemporary, whether it's horror, fantasy, science fiction, literary, magical realism, transgressive, neo-noir—you name it. I never like to write the expected story, but to build on the classic structures and familiar territory, and then take it

in new directions. I loved watching *Twilight Zone*, for example. The new weird is a great movement of fiction, and tapping into that strangeness, that innovation, that newness, is very exciting, something I try to do whenever I can.

You're a writer, editor and designer. Is it hard to wear all three hats, and which hat do you like wearing the most?

It's very difficult, mostly finding the time, as well as trying to make a living at it. As you probably know, it comes in spurts, but even if you sold a short story a week (52 a year) at pro rates, you couldn't survive on it. So, that's why I'm trying not to put all of my eggs in one basket. I write and submit short stories constantly, and am working on novels as well, including a two-book deal with Random House Alibi—*Disintegration* out early next year, *Dexter meets Falling Down*, and *The Breaker* out late in 2015, a bit of *The Professional*, *The Green Mile*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Not only am I editing my own work, and that for Dark House Press, but I've been taking on clients for short stories and novels. And then I pay the mortgage by working as an art director and graphic designer. It's tough to balance it all, and you can't

just sit down and write a brilliant story, sometime the muse isn't talking, even with deadlines looming. I love to write the most, that's for sure, and hopefully everything I've mentioned, in addition to publishing and teaching, will allow me to focus on a career as a writer.

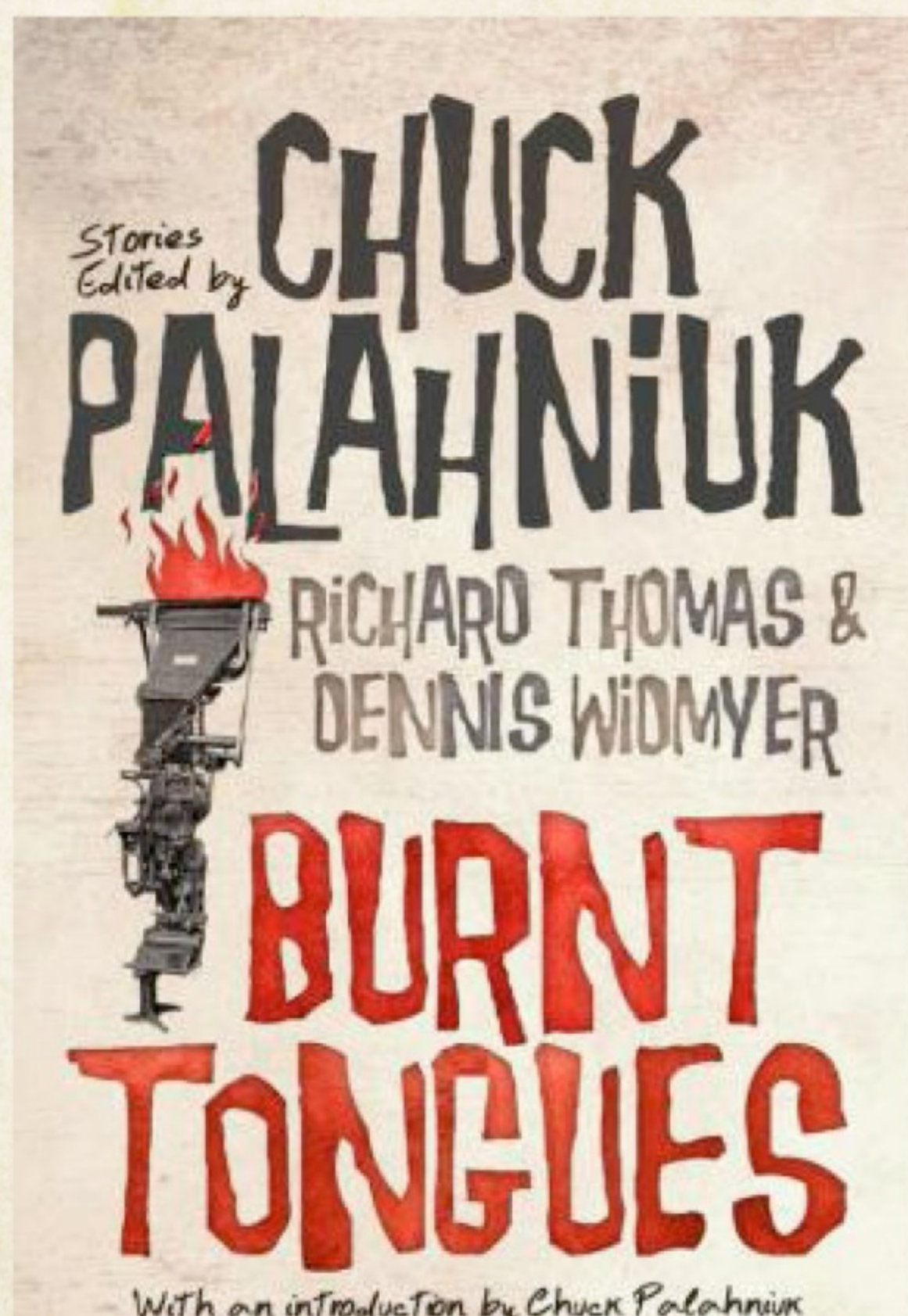
Thinking back on the first short story you had critiqued in a workshop setting, what was the most terrifying about that initial feedback? How should a new writer break the fear that sometimes stops them from opening up to constructive edits of their work?

The early work I showed people, yeah, it was pretty bad. I broke all of the rules, constantly telling instead of showing, no conflict and resolution, no change. The first real class I took online as an adult, about six years ago, was with Craig Clevenger, and I was so nervous. I really didn't know if I could write at all, and

some of the stories were crap for sure, but I felt it was an opportunity to study with a master and Craig really helped me to improve. By the end of the class he told me to start submitting one of my stories, "Stillness" which ended up in *Shivers VI* (Cemetery Dance) alongside Stephen King and Peter Straub, so that was just shocking, and inspiring, and so encouraging. You just have to jump in and be prepared to CHANGE, to LISTEN and learn—to not think that you know everything.

What was your motivation, after so much success already as a writer, in pursuing an MFA? How has your experience been exploring creating writing in academia, and would you recommend it to all writers?

Well, I did go into my MFA with some stories published and even a novel out with a small press, but I was still struggling to break through into the top markets (still am). I wanted to learn about literary fiction, to study the masters, and to have time to write, even though it was a low-res program. It made me much more serious about what I was doing. And I learned a great deal, from my professors, as well as the community down at Murray State University. If I want to teach at the university level, which I do, then I had to get my MFA. As far as academia and whether it's something for everyone—no, it's not. If you want to teach, yes, you have to get your MFA. But while academia is really growing and expanding and changing, there is still a huge problem with adjuncts making up 75% of the teaching force, making terrible wages, as well as much of academia still being overly critical of genre fiction and popular fiction. It's changing, but slowly.



You don't need to get an MFA to be a writer, you can read and write and take a class here and there and do just as well, without the debt. But you really have to be motivated, and know what you're doing, have a plan, and a supportive community around you.

Stephen King is such a powerhouse influence on so many thriller and horror writers. Can you describe some of your other creative influences, other than writers, that have inspired your work? Maybe they are places? Or events?

Great questions. For me a lot of what I write about comes from personal experiences, so the time I spent living in Wicker Park, down in Arkansas, all of the times I screwed up and failed, there's so much material in there. I get just as much excitement and influence out of films and television shows, everything from *The Machinist*, *Amelie*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Memento*, and *Fight Club* to *The Wire*, *True Detective*, *Six Feet Under*, *Lost*, and *Justified*. Music can be a great way to keep you in the mood; I know I listened to a lot of *The Cure*, *Radiohead*, and *The Smiths* while writing my first two novels. And there is so much great art out there—illustrations, photography, sculpture, architecture—whether you see it online, or go experience it in person, there is a lot there to tap into, work that can really inspire you.

You've been the recipient of many awards, several of which for "Maker of Flight." Was that a turning point in your career? What do you think clicked with both critics and fans alike through that piece?

That really did make me feel like I knew what I was doing, that perhaps I had found

my voice. Any time you get accepted it feels great, and with acceptance rates being so low (around 1% for so many publications) it's essentially winning a contest every time you get in. I don't know what exactly worked in "Maker of Flight" except that I think it's a very contained bit of flash fiction, the world-building, the atmosphere, was very rich, and the message it sent, the mixture of sweetness and sorrow, loss (I guess you'd call that bittersweet) really seems to resonate with people. I think that the fact there isn't any real violence, or sex, or bad language in it, that also helps to give it wide appeal. It's one of the few stories I've written that I've read to my kids. Every once in a while one of them will say to me, "I wonder if the sky is still blue?" and it just makes me smile. (Those are the last words to the story.)

Where is your favorite place to write?

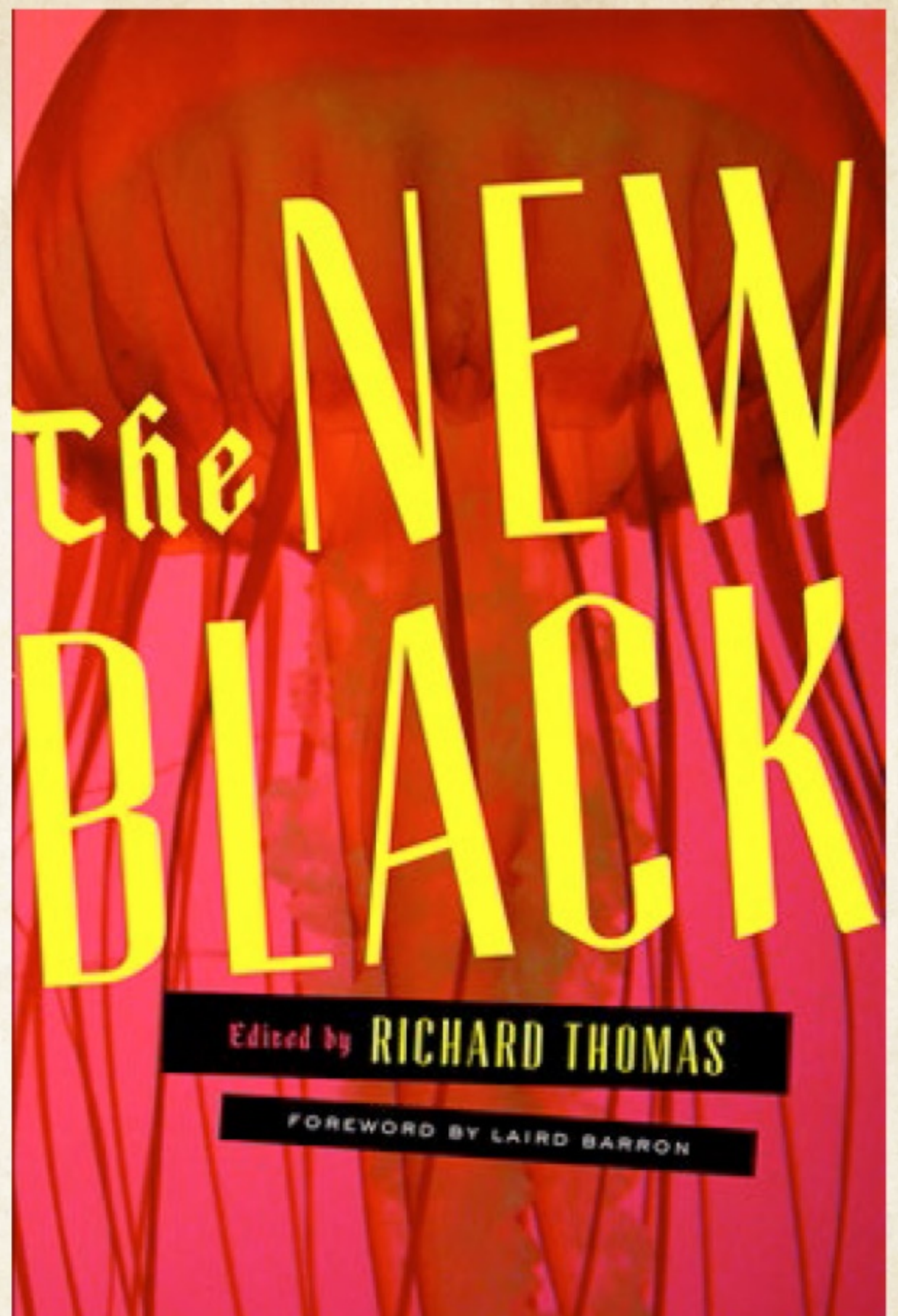


At home, or in a coffee shop? And what do you write on?

I almost always write at home in my office on my Mac. I did write my first novel, *Transubstantiate*, almost exclusively at my on-site office, during my lunch hour, but that's really the exception. I like to be surrounded by books, ones that I've read, as well as ones that I've written, to have all of that knowledge, and information, and inspiration surrounding me. Makes me very happy to write there, even if much of my writing is dark.

For new and emerging authors of the thriller and horror genre out there, what advice do you have for them? Is it a genre that provides a lot of opportunities for young writers?

I think there is a lot of opportunity for horror, for thrillers, for weird fiction. Look at the response to *True Detective*, for example, people LOVED that show, and it was really about the dialogue, the setting, the vibe, the story—it was really well-written, I think, the acting, the art direction. There are certainly authors that are big names who still sell horror and crime and thrillers, just look at the New York Times best sellers list. I think that's part of the reason I write in a number of genres, more opportunity. I just wrote my first Lovecraftian story for an anthology call, *Shadows Over Main Street*, and it was also set in the 1950s, all of it very new and strange for me, but it gave me a chance to stretch and grow as an author. I write contemporary crime and thrillers, I think my novel, *Disintegration*, out next year, is some of my best work to date, and it's firmly in the thriller/horror genres, a nice mix of crime and terror. I think there are more opportunities and pro-paying markets out there than ever before. My



advice is write, keep writing, play with your voice, try out different stories and ideas, first-person and third-person, male and female protagonists, as well as children, past-tense and present-tense, and just see what you can do. Read a lot, read all of the crime and horror magazines, such as *Black Static*, *The Dark*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Lamplight*, *Jamais Vu*, *Shimmer*, *Needle*, etc. and keep your ears open for calls for submissions to anthologies. There is some nice money to be made out there, and it's a great opportunity to build your network, to make new friends, and to get to know so many of these wonderful small presses that are out there working so hard.

How do you feel about multi-media content? An idea transformed from short stories, to comics, to movies, to video games? Does it bring more layers to the cloth of a story, and would you ever want

to flesh out your characters in that way using multiple mediums?

I think it's very exciting. I've been trying to break into comics, but it's very hard, you have to align with talented illustrators, or find a way to get a full-time gig with one of the presses. When my agent announced that we sold *Disintegration* to Random House Alibi, we got several requests for the manuscript, as far as film rights. I'm really excited about that, because of the potential for earnings (which could allow me to stay home and write) as well as the ability to reach so many people with feature films (or television) as well as how cool it would be to go see my novel or short story on the big screen. That would just be amazing. There are lots of opportunities, and I think if you have the ability to build on your characters, the worlds you are building, go for it, definitely.

Some of your writing has been described as "genre-bending." How do you work multiple genres seamlessly into one story, and is there such thing as too many genres in one story?

Well, thanks. I know that when I started going to AWP writing conferences, the authors that were bending genres, they really appealed to me. I loved hearing people like Brian Evenson, Ben Percy, Roxane Gay, Holly Goddard Jones, Lindsay Hunter, and Stephen Graham Jones speak—it really inspired me. I saw how they were changing the genres and the world of academia from within. You can look at Ben Percy, who has been in *The Paris Review*, and his novel *Red Moon*, which is werewolves, as a perfect example of contemporary, literary horror. Or look at *All the Beautiful Sinners* by Stephen Graham Jones, how it reinvents the detective, serial killer novel. When I write,

I rarely think about genre, I think about story. If it's an open call, or something I've been invited into, then sure, I might think, "What is Lovecraftian?" or "What is the horror angle I want for this story?" or "What does Southern gothic mean to me?" I think some of the best writing that's going on today isn't afraid to be weird, isn't afraid to tap into the tension of horror, the magic of fantasy, the technology of science fiction, or the elevated language of literary fiction. I mean, just one example, what is horror? For classic horror, it often had certain stories, certain creatures, and expectations. Now, I see horror can be in all shapes and forms, not just the boogiemonster (werewolves, vampires, zombies, etc.) but the horror within, the horror next door, the fear of loss and danger that lurks around every corner. Whether your story is grounded in reality or slips into the supernatural, there are so many ways to get people invested in your story and your characters, to care about them, to feel strong emotions, and then take your readers on a wild ride, one that hopefully leaves them smiling and spent.

More about Richard:

Richard Thomas is the author of three books—*Transubstantiate*, *Herniated*, *Roots* and *Staring Into the Abyss*. He has also appeared in over 75 publications. For more information visit www.whatdoesnotkillme.com

Where the Horror Happens With Sydney Leigh

Can you describe what your workspace is like?

It's actually quite comfortable and functions rather nicely, considering it was constructed out of random parts. I have a beautiful office in our finished basement, but after an accident several years ago, I wasn't able to get much use out of it. Since then, I put together a pseudo-office of sorts in my living room. It's slightly crowded, but works out perfectly—especially after some recent surgery rendered me immobile for a spell. I have everything I need, though: a sofa table masquerading as a desk, windows, a bookcase within reach, and plenty of spots for my ghostwriter Holden to lounge about.

Working from home certainly has its perks.

Do you have a go-to gadget / app or service that you cannot live without?

Since my surgery, my iPad has been a lifesaver. I balked at the idea of getting one initially, but it's really been instrumental in me continuing to work, write, and communicate when I can't sit at my desk or use my computer. I also use my iPhone quite a bit to check email and Facebook, and I post pretty regularly on the Villipede Publications Facebook page—so I'd say that's a social media application I'm pretty heavily reliant upon.





Do you have a set routine while you work?

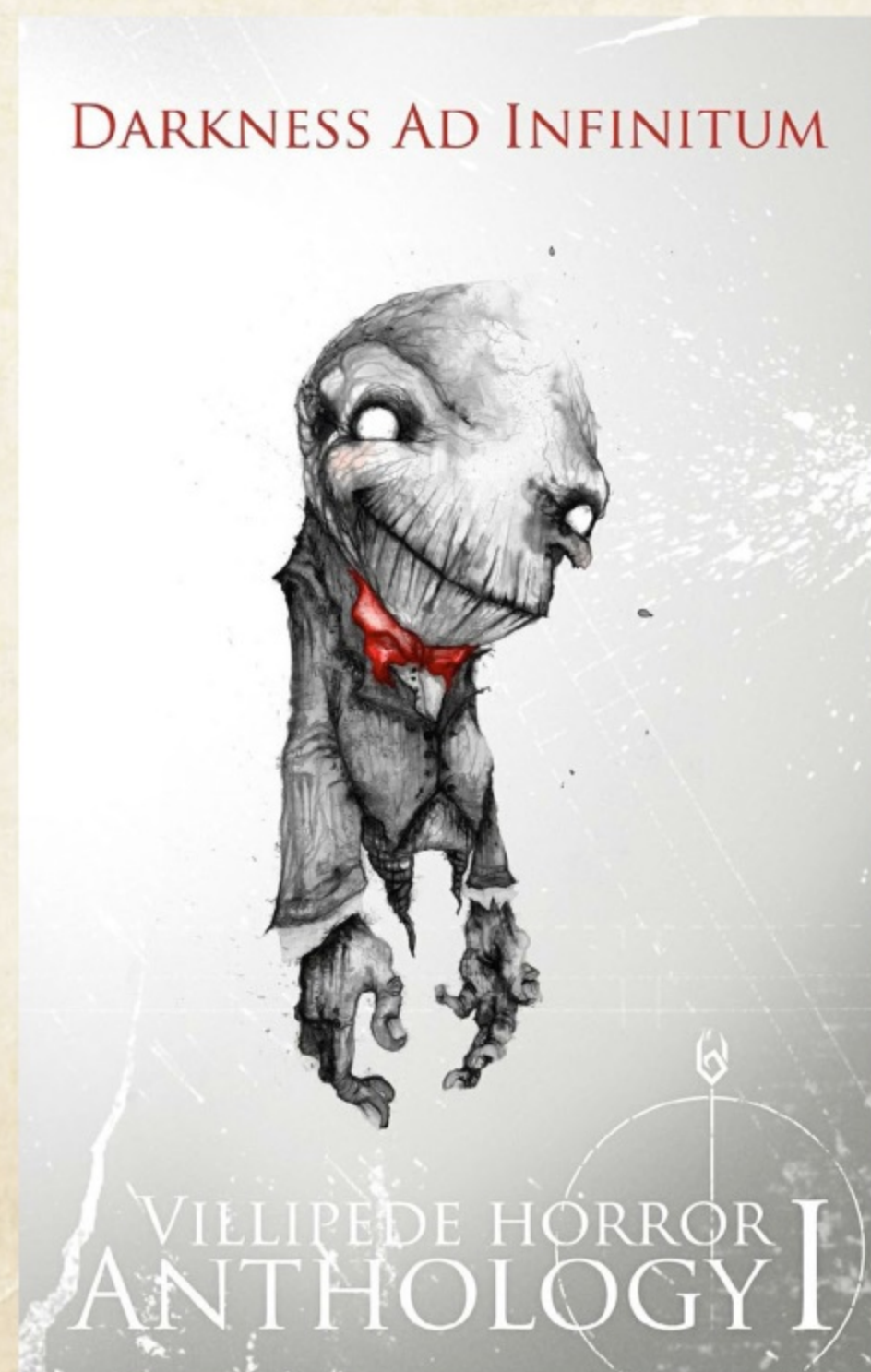
Universally, I'm not what you'd call a creature of habit. I rarely do things the same way twice or follow a schedule. My work routine might be described as somewhat compulsive, however. I tend to go on binges and marathons where I work non-stop until I can't function anymore. It's not healthy, not a routine I'd recommend, and not one my family is happy about. My to-do list has been referred to as "apocalyptic", and my workload is in fact quite staggering at times. But I have a strong work ethic, take my job and my writing seriously, and consider myself fairly productive. It's something I'm trying to find a way to manage better, though. It's important to take breaks and prioritize, both for your physical and emotional well-being — and I'm sure my stress level would decrease significantly if I took better care of myself while I worked. I'd like to be

able to walk away from my work when I need to more easily than I do now. Life is too short, and I know there's a balance there somewhere . . . I just need to find it.

What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?

Writing advice? Man, that's tough. There's a lot I've found useful over the years. Since I struggled to find inspiration for so long after my accident, I think Stephen King's take on the muse from *On Writing* is something that stuck with me:

"There is a muse, but he's not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer. He lives in the ground. He's a basement kind of guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all



the grunt labor, in other words, while the muse sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you. Do you think it's fair? I think it's fair. He may not be much to look at, that muse-guy, and he may not be much of a conversationalist, but he's got inspiration. It's right that you should do all the work and burn all the mid-night oil, because the guy with the cigar and the little wings has got a bag of magic. There's stuff in there that can change your life. Believe me, I know."

Where do you think the horror genre is headed in the next 12 months?

Well, I'm no expert—and I tend not to concern myself with those matters much, to be honest. But I think it's probably going in several different directions at once. First of all, we have a generous amount of established writers

continuing to write consistently high quality horror fiction. I think we can safely rely upon them to keep delivering the stories we love without getting bored. Secondly, we have a generation of new writers who are following suit and making their mark on the industry, but also testing the waters and carving out new niches for themselves . . . some are exploring the sub-genres, and some are constructing new ones. Unfortunately, I also think that the growing trend of self-publishing does have a significant downside, which means that thirdly, we're inundated with a surge of writers who are pushing work that is poorly edited, isn't particularly well-written, and lacks the fundamental elements of a professionally published manuscript. There are definitely writers self-publishing quality fiction and working hard to do the things a publisher or agent generally does, but others are



under the impression that their work is on par with traditionally published authors, and that just isn't the case. Regardless, I think we'll see a lot of exquisite fiction emerge—whether it's waiting to be read, being written, or just the beginnings of an idea scribbled on the back of a napkin.

Do you have a final piece of advice for our readers?

As a writer, my advice is to write every day . . . even if you're feeling uninspired. If the wind doesn't serve, take to the oars. Read as much as you possibly can, as well. Then read more. It's imperative that you're familiarizing yourself with masters of the craft—and not to emulate them, necessarily, but to set your expectations of yourself high enough. And as King said, "Do not come lightly to the blank page."

As an editor, my advice is to do everything it takes to get your work polished and ready to submit before sending it out. Write, rewrite, revise, edit. If possible, have people you don't know give your work honest critiques. Don't be in a hurry to see your work in print and sacrifice quality for instant gratification. Research markets beforehand. Find the right home for your work and don't be deterred by rejection. It's a part of the business we all have to endure.

As a teacher, my advice is to be humble and open to learning what others have to teach. Be receptive to constructive criticism even if it stings. The only way we ever thrive is by learning and growing.

As a human being, my advice is to be kind, both to yourself and others. Hug your pets. Steal glimpses of your children while they're sleeping. Give to

others for the sake of giving. Follow your dreams. Love deeply. Walk in the woods. And always look up at the stars . . . even if you're in the gutter.

About Sydney:

Sydney Leigh is the evil literary double of a mostly sane writer, editor, photographer, artist, English teacher, and native of the North Shore. Her poetry, drabble, short fiction, articles, and reviews have appeared in various magazines, anthologies, and on bar napkins across the country. She has short fiction and poetry forthcoming in *The Library of the Dead* from Written Backwards, Book 38, *The Horror Zine*, 22 *More Shivers*, *Our World of Horror*, and more.

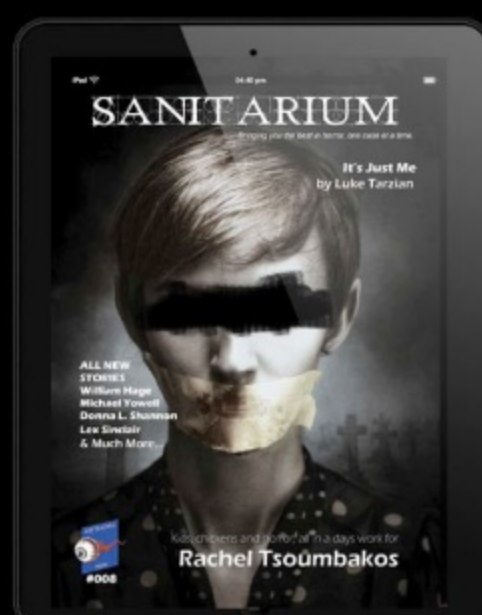
You can find her on Goodreads, Facebook, Amazon, and at Villipede Publications, where she spends her days charming letters and constructing nightmares—or drop into her website at

<http://thespiderbox.shawnaleighbernard.com>.

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